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**‘CASTLES IN THE AIR’ : BRITISH FILM AND THE RECONSTRUCTION
OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT, 1939-51**

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Thesis submitted for a PhD in Social History
at the University of Warwick

May 1998

SUMMARY

This thesis is an examination of British films which discuss and propose the reconstruction of the built environment. It concentrates on the period 1939-51 but also looks at those films made during the inter-war period. It examines how and why the films were produced, and how they present the issues of reconstruction. The particular aims are to see what the films might tell us about the relationship between planners, architects, politicians and the ordinary people - the people who would be the beneficiaries of reconstruction. Secondly, to ascertain what impact the films had on popular attitudes to town planning and building.

The main findings are that the films were considered a very important way of communicating with the general public and that they were specifically designed to widen the debate and the process of reconstruction beyond the professionals to ordinary citizens. However, despite these noble and sincere aims the films had only limited effect in achieving this. As a result of studying the production and distribution of the films one has also a better understanding of the relationship between film-makers and the government propaganda agencies to which they were contracted. The most important conclusion from this aspect of the research is that they were highly constrained in the kind of films on reconstruction they could make despite their efforts to produce radical work. Finally the Central Office of Information films of the post-war period show that the Labour Government was similarly committed to involving and informing the people in the new world that they planned to build.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to the staff, past and present, of the Centre for Social History at Warwick University for their help and encouragement during the preparation of this thesis, especially Professor Gwynne Lewis, Professor Carolyn Steedman, and Dr. Jim Obelkevich. A special thanks must go to the departmental secretary Ros Lucas, who has been my main contact point, for her assistance, advice on university administrative matters and good humour. But most of all I thank Dr. Tony Mason and Dr. Nick Tiratsoo who have been my supervisors. They have advised and guided my research and writing with intelligence, great diligence, care and, most of all, patience.

I thank my colleagues at the Imperial War Museum for giving me the time to conduct the research for this thesis and for their expert advice and many suggestions. I would particularly like to thank my friends and colleagues, past and present, in the Film and Video Archive, namely Roger Smither, Paul Sargent, Jane Fish, Fola Braimoh, Virginia Bilcliff, John Kerr, Kay Gladstone, David Wood, Ray Williams, David Oddy, Dave Curtis, Ramon Day, Joan Stead, Steven Lovesay, Brian Mongini and Tom Adams. Also all the Film and Video Archive staff at Hayes and Duxford for helping me with access to films, namely Ralph Page-Croft, Jack Allen and John Schlackman, Terry Watson, David Walsh, Brian Downing, Frank Le Gros, Lynn Nolder, Ken Ball, Ajit Binepal, Mark Bridle, Anne Charlton, Richard Drake, Rita Fitzgerald, and Janet Legg. Lastly, I thank the long-suffering friends and colleagues with whom I share an office, Brad King and Teresa Silk. They have helped and supported me in many ways and I owe them a hundred years of bacon rolls.

Historians working in Britain are fortunate to be assisted by a highly skilled and helpful profession of archivists and librarians. Therefore I thank those at the PRO in Kew and at the British Library in central London and Colindale. But I would particularly like to thank the following for their help and advice during research: Sue Flood and Christine Shearman at the Hertfordshire Record Office; Angela Esserin at Welwyn Garden City Library; Howard Bloch at the Stratford Library; Jane Collings at the RIBA archive; Doug Hindmarch at Sheffield Central Library; Richard Storey and staff at the Modern Records Centre; Professor Michael Twyman at the Department of Graphics, Reading University; and Roy Fowler of the BECTU Oral History Project. Thanks also go to the various film archivists who have provided access to their collections and suggested relevant titles, particularly Rachael Holdsworth at the North West Film Archive; Janet McBain and the staff at the Scottish Film Archive; Jenny Hammerton and Ron Saunders at Pathe. The staff of viewing services at the NFTVA have very generously arranged a number of viewings at Stephen Street, thus I am indebted to Bryony Dixon, Ali Strauss, Julie Rigg and Elaine Burrows.

The following private individuals have been very generous in giving me access to personal papers which have been of immense help in my research: Gertrude Nathan, Jane Rockes (née Reed), and Sir Denis and Adam Forman. Thanks also to Peggy Gick, Sidney Cole, Sir Walter Lassally, Sir Denis Forman, Jill Craigie and Kay Mander for agreeing to be recorded at length discussing their careers in the British film industry.

I have also received help and encouragement from other historians who were either my peers at Warwick or formerly studying at the Centre, namely Steve Fielding, Steve Koerner, Peter Thompson, Joan Keating, Ruth Livesey, Tatsuya Tsubaki and Hideo Ichiashi. I also thank the following non-Warwick post-graduates for sharing knowledge and giving moral support during my studies: Abigail Beach, Richard Weight, Becky Conekin and Sarah Easen. A special thank you to Tim Boon who is working in a related area and has proffered much information. Professor John Gold and Stephen Ward, whose work has been a starting point for this thesis, have also given much encouragement. Professor Michael Burke has been very generous with his knowledge and made various connections and insights on the period and the films which has given me a much broader appreciation of their significance.

Greetings and thanks to my mates for buying me beers and pretending to be interested, in no special order: Bob Ash; Mark Brandon and Sid; Matt and Sarah Lingard; Helen and John Warton; Ron and Kate Daniel; Marc and Debbie Radvanyi; Charis White; Chick, Mary-Rose and Amanda Parkinson; Juan Pan-Montojo and Ana Sisniega; Lennox; Mike McCormack; George Corbett; Mark Consedine; Alex Hamilton; Mike Bush; Ian Mullett; Simon Keogh; Guy Lether; John and Sue Bullen; Peter Kent; Julie Robertshaw and all my other trade union comrades; Lucy Goode; Wook Hamilton; Brett O'Brien; Mark Ray; Kate and Tony Davison; Julian, Sophie and Sylvia Hargreaves; Rachel Cranmer-Gordon; Ginny Lewis; Noel Tovey; Robin Saklatvala and Fiona Eastwood; Merino Vigliotti; Guido Barbarto; Nigel Spencer.

Without the help and generosity of the following friends it would have been extremely difficult to complete this thesis. Alex White who proof read it with great skill and intelligence, and Lincoln Elias, Mark Harding, Kate Johnson and Gawaine Lewis who provided invaluable support in other ways.

Finally I thank my family for all their moral support and encouragement over the years. Prue, Don, Will and Amy Anderson; Malcolm, Justine, Tim, Celia and Sarah Hooson; Katie and Simon Blyth. Lastly my mother Deirdre O'Day who proof read much of this thesis and helped me in countless ways. I dedicate this work to Deirdre O'Day, my father Charles Haggith and my grandmother 'Topsy' O'Day.

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PREFACE

This thesis is an examination of British films which discuss and propose the reconstruction of the built environment. It concentrates on the period 1939-51 but also looks at those films made during the inter-war period. It examines how and why the films were produced, and how they present the issues of reconstruction. The particular aims are to see what the films might tell us about the relationship between planners, architects, politicians and the ordinary people - the people who would be the beneficiaries of reconstruction. Secondly, to ascertain what impact the films had on popular attitudes to town planning and building.

The main findings are that the films were considered a very important way of communicating with the general public and that they were specifically designed to widen the debate and the process of reconstruction beyond the professionals to ordinary citizens. However, despite these noble and sincere aims the films had only limited effect in achieving this. As a result of studying the production and distribution of the films one has also a better understanding of the relationship between film-makers and the government propaganda agencies to which they were contracted. The most important conclusion from this aspect of the research is that they were highly constrained in the kind of films on reconstruction they could make despite their efforts to produce radical work. Finally the Central Office of Information films of the post-war period show that the Labour Government was similarly committed to involving and informing the people in the new world that they planned to build.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABCA	Army Bureau of Current Affairs
AA	Architectural Association
BC	British Council
BFI	British Film Institute
CEMA	Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts
CEA	Cinema Exhibitors Association
CFL	Central Film Library
COI	Central Office of Information
DATA	Documentary Technicians Alliance
GTCPA	Garden City and Town and Country Planning Association
KHT	Kensington Housing Trust
L.C.C.	London County Council
MOH	Ministry of Health
MOI	Ministry of Information
MOTCP	Ministry of Town and Country Planning
MOW	Ministry of Works
MOWP	Ministry of Works and Planning
NALGO	National Association of Local Government Officers
NFHS	National Federation of Housing Societies
PCO	Production Controlling Officer
PR	Public Relations
PRO	Public Relations Officer

RIBA	Royal Institute of British Architects
TCPA	Town and Country Planning Association
WEA	Workers Educational Association
WEEFS	West Essex Film Society

Abbreviations for Film Production

sp	sponsor
pc	production company
pr	producer
dir	director
ph	photographer/camera operator
cam	camera operator

Introduction

It is a widely held belief that many of the current problems of British urban society can be traced back to the ill-considered decisions made by planners, architects and Labour politicians of the 1940s-1960s.¹ A particularly bitter aspect of this explanation, and one shared by people on the right and left, is that those responsible for re-building Britain, made no attempt to consult the people who would have to live in the redeveloped towns and new housing estates. Architects and planners have been very sensitive to such attacks.² It is no surprise then that experts involved in urban redevelopment projects today, are excited by the advances in computer technology which make it possible to bring their designs to life, presenting three dimensional views of buildings and their interiors, and even whole districts and cities, to ordinary people.³ The ability of these computer models to show how a new building would look and the interactive nature of these simulations has led some people to predict the 'end of planning disasters'.⁴ Although this technology is new, the particular problems that it is designed to overcome are perennial. During the war and the years of reconstruction afterwards that are so maligned, planners, architects and politicians used drawings, plans, scale models and films in order to explain their designs to ordinary people. Film was seen as a particularly

¹ All books are published in London unless otherwise indicated. Nick Tiratsoo, 'New Vistas': the Labour Party, citizenship and the built environment in the 1940's', in Richard Weight and Abigail Beach (eds.), The Right to Belong: Citizenship and National Identity in Britain, 1930-1960, (1998), pp. 136-138.

² See 'People before Beauty' on the need for developing 'planning as a conversation', in the Guardian 14 January 1998.

³ See Jonathan Glancey's article on the work of the Architecture Foundation, 'Capital Games' in the Guardian 24 November 1997. The Architecture Foundation was set up in 1991 and aims to improve the built environment by bringing ordinary people and architects together. In particular they use computer simulations of architectural proposals for new buildings and urban improvement schemes to involve the public. See also 'Cybertecture' on the Architectural Foundation's exhibition London Interactive, in The Independent 22 November 1997.

⁴ Clive Davidson, 'Simulated Cities: The Game Grows Up', New Scientist, 10 June 1995, p. 36.

useful tool, not only because it could explain and simplify design proposals, but also because it was believed that its populist and entertaining nature would encourage debate and participation on reconstruction. In fact the kind of qualities and characteristics now applied to computer simulations were, in the 1940s and 1950s, claimed for film. As a result, in the years 1939-51 a large number of films on the reconstruction of the built environment were produced; at least fifty non-fiction films are cited in this thesis. The majority of reconstruction films were produced by the government through the wartime Ministry of Information's (MOI) Films Division, and after 1946 in the same section of the Central Office of Information (COI).

The purpose of this research project is to examine how these films presented the subject of reconstruction of the built environment, why and how they came to be made, and to assess what impact they had on popular attitudes to reconstruction. Because film was seen as a populist medium, the research presented here is particularly concerned with re-examining the attitudes of politicians and building experts to the concept of popular participation.

Most film historians of the Second World War, have been interested in issues of propaganda in general, rather than specific aspects of policy. Clive Coultass,⁵ Peter Stead,⁶ and Robert Murphy,⁷ have looked at both feature films and MOI shorts on the broad topic of peace-aims, but have only done so as part of a more general survey of wartime film. James Chapman's recent study has mentioned the titles on reconstruction,

⁵ Clive Coultass, Images for Battle: British Film and The Second World War (1989).

⁶ Peter Stead, Film and the Working Class in British and American Society (1989).

⁷ Robert Murphy, Realism and Tinsel: Cinema and Society in Britain 1939-49 (1989).

but again he has been more interested in the general development of wartime propaganda, and particularly in demonstrating that the state's management of film propaganda was much more successful and harmonious than has been claimed.⁸

The film historian Nicholas Pronay mentions the wartime films on reconstruction of the built environment, in an article about a group of MOI films on the subject of peace-aims. These propaganda films were surprisingly critical of the unemployment, slum housing and industrial decline, that had characterised certain areas of inter-war Britain. They followed this critique with a demand that there be no return to the problems of the pre-war period and made various vague proposals to rebuild Britain with the 'spirit' and the methods of the war in order to create a fairer society. In some examples, notably *World of Plenty* (1943), actual proposals were made to introduce left-wing interventionist policies to ensure that the blight of poverty, hunger, and other ills would be eradicated. When looking at these films Pronay was very critical of those on planning, which he contends, presented the process from the perspective of the technocrats and planning visionaries.⁹ Typically, he says, the films explained to the viewer the problems of cities, and then advocated the creation of 'New Jerusalems', 'some of them glaringly obvious and dreadful post-war mistakes in town planning including several of the very blocks of flats which were blown up as uninhabitable'.¹⁰ He is also highly critical of those films which emphasised the consultation process in planning, arguing that they were not only manipulative but a laughably inaccurate

⁸ James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda 1939-1945* (1998).

⁹ Nicholas Pronay, 'Land of Promise: The Projection of Peace Aims in Britain', in K.R.M. Short, (ed.), *Film and Propaganda in World War Two* (1983), p. 70.

¹⁰ Ibid.

representation of events on the ground.¹¹ Apart from his views on the planning films, he made some contentious assertions about how the peace-aims films came to be made and their historical importance.¹² Firstly, that for a variety of reasons, left-wing documentary film makers took control of the Films Division of the MOI.¹³ Secondly, that once in place this group proceeded, in a conspiratorial fashion, to produce and distribute left-wing peace-aims films under the umbrella of the official propaganda film system. Thirdly, that the Labour Party's election victory of 1945 was partly due to the people's exposure to these films. Pronay's analysis places him alongside the historian Correlli Barnett, who has blamed Labour's triumph, and many of Britain's subsequent problems, on the manipulation of popular opinion by left-wing propagandists offering hope of a 'New Jerusalem'.¹⁴

While not all historians agree with Pronay's version of the story of the MOI, a number share his belief that the impact of wartime cinema on the popular political consciousness was strong. For example Aldgate and Richards state: 'Finally it is clear that cinema played a positive and purposeful role in its own right in generating adherence

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ This somewhat inaccurately-named style of film-making had been developed at the Empire Marketing Board and later the GPO under the inspiration of John Grierson. In essence such films were supposed to be a record of 'real people' and their activities in which there was an attempt to capture the truth of their lives and experiences. The aim of most of these film-makers was political and social reform. The documentary style dictated certain conventions - the use of real people and locations rather than actors and artificial sets, and as little scripted speech as possible. However, such conventions were frequently broken. Harry Watt, the director, for example frequently used a dramatic narrative structure, which differed little from feature films, and Paul Rotha would use actors, sets, and any number of surreal devices, if he thought they were necessary to develop his polemical approach to issues such as housing or the distribution of food. Harry Watt's film *North Sea* (1938) is a good example, and after the war he produced features such as *The Overlanders* (1946). Paul Rotha's films *World Plenty* (1943) and *Land of Promise* (1946) both employed actors used artificial sets and a number of obviously 'filmic' devices.

¹⁴ Correlli Barnett, The Audit of War: the Illusion and Reality of Britain as a Great Nation, (1986), especially p.11, pp. 19-25 & p. 36.

to the new-found consensus of the war years'.¹⁵ Miles and Smith go further, arguing that although not many saw the work of the documentary film movement, the impact it had on the contemporary film industry helped 'to prepare the psychological ground which worked itself out politically in the Labour landslide in the General Election of 1945'.¹⁶ The interesting thing is that most of these historians, who are basically supporting a radical interpretation, actually end up agreeing with Pronay who, like Correlli Barnett, resents the apparent success of left-wing propagandists. This interpretation must partly stem from the impression given to us by many people writing about film at the end of the war, such as Andrew Buchanan, who were convinced that they had detected a change in British cinema tastes, indicating an interest in social and political issues.¹⁷

Historians such as Coultass, Stead, Higson and Chapman are much more sceptical about the impact of film, particularly documentary, on wartime political attitudes. Higson has explained that many of those features previously considered to promote a radical agenda, contained contradictions in their view of wartime society which tends to nullify any possible political impact.¹⁸ Chapman believes that official films on reconstruction did not have much impact on people's attitudes or behaviour.¹⁹

Post-war official film is touched on by Crofts in his study of the COI's ongoing campaign to exhort people to assist with the rebuilding of the post-war economy.²⁰ He is

¹⁵ Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards in Britain can Take it: The British Cinema in the Second World War (Oxford, 1986), p. 13

¹⁶ Peter Miles and Malcolm Smith, Cinema, Literature and Society, Elite and Mass Culture in Inter War Britain (1987), p. 247.

¹⁷ Andrew Buchanan, Film and the Future (1945).

¹⁸ Andrew Higson, Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain (Oxford, 1995).

¹⁹ Chapman, British, p. 107 & pp. 112-113.

²⁰ William Crofts, Coercion or Persuasion: Propaganda in Britain After 1945 (1989).

generally scathing about these films, with the exception of the (*Charley*) cartoons produced by Halas & Batchelor. He also argues that the government propaganda campaign, including its use of film, lacked an overall strategy. He believes that the Labour party was always slightly uneasy about using propaganda, and also argues that the constraining influence of the Treasury was much greater when dealing with the COI than it had been with the MOI. Paul Swann is also dismissive of the Labour government's attempt at using film for public relations purposes, which he describes as inept, and ultimately detrimental to the public relations network built up during the war.²¹ Hogenkamp's detailed study of the use of film by the COI, concentrates on the experience of the documentary firm DATA, and is helpful in explaining the attitude of the new Labour government to film propaganda, and particularly the relationship between the film-makers and the COI.²²

The major drawback of all the work by the film historians is that the authors have been highly selective about which films they would study. As a result, any attempt to find a pattern, or to place films in the context of historical events and processes, has been unsatisfactory. There has also been no systematic attempt to compare the discussions of specific issues between films produced by the government, and those produced independently. For example, Murphy looks at the commercially funded *Land of Promise* (1946), but he does not compare it with MOI films such as *New Towns for Old* (1942) and *Proud City* (1946). There has also been little effort made to trace the treatment of these issues into the period of actual reconstruction (1945-51). Geoff Brown's article

²¹ Paul Swann, *The Hollywood Feature Film and Post-war Britain* (1987).

²² Albert Hogenkamp, 'The Use of film as a medium of information with special reference to the politics of the 1945-51 British Labour Government', (PhD thesis, CNAA, 1991).

‘Which way to the way ahead?’ in Sight & Sound (4, 1978), does explore the fate of peace-aims in documentary film after 1945. But despite making some valuable points, his short article is more concerned with the fate of idealism in the documentary film movement and British cinema, rather than with the specific treatment of reconstruction in film. Although Coultass’s book is generally useful, he along with other authors, does not rigorously position films on peace-aims within the context of the wartime debates and proposals on issues such as town planning, health reform or industrial regeneration. For example the Beveridge Report is mentioned in all these works as a green light to the release of peace-aims films. While this is true, it does not explain how such films came to be released before this date.

Coultass, Aldgate and Richards and others, draw heavily on historians such as Arthur Marwick and Paul Addison who see the war as a crucible of social and political change. They particularly endorse Addison's thesis that a consensus evolved during the war behind progressive reform, which led logically to the Labour victory in 1945.²³ They pay less attention to the work of historians such as Kevin Jeffreys, who is highly sceptical of the view that the war saw a high degree of cross-party political agreement which led to the smooth formulation of reforming legislation.²⁴ Neither do they refer to the work of other historians, especially those in Harold Smith (ed.), War and Social Change (1986), whose work has tended to moderate the view that the war was the key factor in the development of the welfare state.²⁵ Mason, Thompson, Tiratsoo and Fielding have also suggested that the level of popular political interest supposedly

²³ Paul Addison, The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War (1977).

²⁴ Kevin Jeffrey’s ‘British Politics and Social Policy During the Second World War’, Historical Journal, 1, (1987).

²⁵ H.A.L. Smith, (ed.), War and Social Change, British Society in the Second World War (1986).

aroused during the war has been exaggerated.²⁶ They argue that debates about post-war reform were not widespread, and that most people's aspirations for the peace-time were not for unbridled socialism but for a 'return to some kind of normalcy'. In fact Fielding has argued that the 1945 election did not mark a historically unique peak of popular idealism, but rather a familiar open-eyed cynicism, in which the electorate voted Labour because the other choices were beyond the pale.²⁷

The conclusions of my own research into the MOI peace-aims films, found that Pronay had given a distorted account of the relationship between the MOI and documentary film-makers. He was wrong to claim that the films were subversive propaganda and a reflection of a conspiracy.²⁸ It was also argued that he greatly exaggerated the film's impact on people's political attitudes. However, his interpretation of the planning films themselves was not so easy to counter in such a short study, which partly provided the idea for this thesis. Moreover, as will be seen later, others have taken a similarly cynical view of the idealistic view of planning portrayed.

Some of the most interesting and relevant work on films about the built environment has come from architectural and planning historians. Writers have explored the links between cinema and architecture, examples being the way buildings have been used to create mood and metaphor,²⁹ or the way film has influenced architecture and

²⁶ Nick Tiratsoo, (ed.) The Attlee Years, (1991).

²⁷ Steven Fielding, 'What did the People Want?: The Meaning of the 1945 General Election', Historical Journal, 35, (1992).

²⁸ Toby Haggith, 'Post-War Reconstruction as Depicted in Official British Films of the Second World War', (Msc dissertation, Birkbeck College, University of London, 1991), and in a condensed article of the same title in Imperial War Museum Review, 7 (1992).

²⁹ See Raymond Durnat, Durnat on Films, (1976), chapter 6.

popular taste in interior design, a process which has also operated in reverse.³⁰ Film has frequently been described as the activity closest to architecture: both forms rely on light and shade, are experienced collectively and are expensive to produce. Raymond Durgnat has even suggested that walking through a building has its cinematic equivalents in the pan and tracking shot.³¹ It is no coincidence then that a number of film-makers such as Eisenstein, Antonioni, Fritz Lang, and a high proportion of art directors have had an architectural background. Recently, architectural and planning historians have begun to look at propaganda and documentary films which are not about architectural style, but about the problems of the built environment, namely poor housing and the chaos of unplanned cities. Nicholas Bullock has assessed how the British documentary film movement helped to advance the cause of urban redevelopment from the 1930s to the early 1950s. In doing so he has relied heavily on the work of Pronay, and has tended to repeat his ideas about the significance of the documentary, and exaggerated the impact of film on the cause of post-war reconstruction.³² However, he has noticed, usefully, that the films on this subject have lacked architectural detail. John Gold and Stephen Ward, from the fields of planning and geography, have provided the most important and thorough analysis of films on reconstruction of the built environment. What is particularly valuable, is that they not only position the films in the history of town planning and urban reform, but have a good understanding of the ideological and aesthetic aspects of documentary film.

³⁰ Donald Albrecht, 'Backlot America: The Impact of Film and Television on Architecture', in Nadine Covert (ed.) Architecture on Screen: A directory of Films and Video (Washington, 1993).

³¹ Durgnat, On Films, p. 98.

³² Nicholas Bullock, Imagining the Post-War World, in Francois Penz and Maureen Thomas (eds.), Cinema and Architecture: Méliès, Mallet-Steven, Multimedia, (1997), p. 60.

Gold and Ward describe an evolution in the film depiction of housing and planning issues.³³ In the pre-war period, films such as *Housing Problems* (1935) and *Kensal House* (1938), advocated slum clearance as the method of urban renewal, with planning not portrayed until the war years.³⁴ In other words, not until those in government had begun to accept that planning was the way forward did film reflect this approach. After the war, they observe that films on urban planning were superseded by those such as *New Town* (1948) and *A Home of Your Own* (1951), which promoted the idea of the new town.³⁵ This development occurred, because it became necessary to promote the new towns after the passing of the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act.

In the post-war period Gold and Ward argue that films on the built environment show an attempt to move away from ‘planning into a more individualistic, home based conception of the urban future’.³⁶ This was done to promote the new town, and planning more effectively to the public, who it was thought were being alienated by the arcane film and planning debates of the war years. From this observation, Gold and Ward draw a controversial but interesting conclusion, that the films illustrate ‘a profound gap between planner and society’ which revealed itself in the disastrous urban reconstruction of the post-war years.

³³ John Gold and Stephen Ward, “‘We’re going to do it right this time’: Cinematic Representations of Urban Planning and the British New Towns, 1939-1951’, in S.C. Aitken and L. Zonn, (eds.), Place, Power, Situation and Spectacle: A Geography of Film, (1994).

³⁴ Gold and Ward, ‘We’re going’, p. 6. (Please note the page references come from the authors pre-publication m.s. and may differ from the published version).

³⁵ Gold and Ward, ‘We’re going’, p. 3.

³⁶ Gold and Ward, ‘We’re going’, p. 32.

In their most recent essay on the subject, they concentrate on the different ways film-makers have interpreted the planning process and the planner during the years 1935-52. They discern four methods adopted when presenting planning: as 'science and rationality', 'social medicine', 'the pursuit of vision' and 'planning as wizardry'.³⁷ The planner has been presented as a brilliant mixture of artist and scientist, adding the masterful visionary touches to the more mundane preliminary research and survey work.³⁸ But most importantly, they have emphasised the cinematic presentation of planning as a 'top-down' activity, with little participation from the people. The implication in their writing, which they have made more explicit in lectures, is that this method of presentation reflects the deliberate exclusion of the people from the planning process.

As valuable as their work has been, they have left a number of avenues unexplored. They have not examined the production process in depth and how this might have had an impact on the films. Like other commentators, they have tended to concentrate on the films of the documentarists, sidelining other relevant films and producers, such as the amateurs. They have not attempted to look at the reception of films, nor have they had space to examine those non-governmental organisations such as the Royal Institute of British Architects which have been closely involved in film production.

³⁷ John Gold, and Stephen Ward, 'Of Plans and Planners, documentary film and the urban future, 1935-52', in D.B. Clarke, (ed.), The Cinematic City, (1997), pp. 66-73.

³⁸ Gold and Ward, 'Of Plans', pp. 73-76.

A similar view of the films has appeared in more populist accounts such as the television programme *A Home of Your Own: New Jerusalem*, on the history of British housing policy since 1945, which used sequences from planning and reconstruction films to highlight the ironic and hypocritical nature of the utopian promises made.³⁹ As will be shown later, taking films out of context as these commentators have done, has led to a misunderstanding of their significance.

This prejudiced view of planning has come under attack by historians who have looked in greater depth at the story of British reconstruction on a town-by-town basis and as part of a general movement.⁴⁰ Their conclusions have shown that the picture is far more complicated than at first appears. Firstly, that reconstruction schemes were rarely as ambitious as has been stated, due to the mass of local and national constraints which began to impinge on the plans almost as soon as they had been produced. Secondly, that in general the priority was for house-building rather than grandiose schemes, and that the ultimate success of many reconstruction projects, depended not on the plans of architects, but on adequate funding to provide the shops, social amenities, schools and other resources vital to create proper communities. A particular focus of this revisionist research has been to look at the degree to which the people were consulted in the planning process. Tiratsoo in particular has shown that there was actually far greater commitment by planners, architects and politicians to consult the local population than

³⁹ *A Home of Your Own* was part of a series on the history of the British welfare state called *New Jerusalem*, broadcast in the summer of 1995, on BBC2, and produced by Barraclough/Carey. This programme was shown on the 25 June 1995.

⁴⁰ See for example, Nick Tiratsoo, *Reconstruction, Affluence and Labour Politics, Coventry: 1945-60* (1990) and Junichi Hasegawa, *Replanning the Blitzed City Centre: A Comparative Study of Bristol, Coventry and Southampton, 1941-50* (Buckingham, 1992), and also Tiratsoo, already cited in Weight and Beach.

has been assumed. Most importantly, the people's lack of involvement stemmed more from their apathy and disinterest in the whole endeavour, than because of an elitist strategy to exclude them.⁴¹

This revisionist approach has been influential in the research for this thesis and informs many of the case studies that will follow. In relation to this new interpretation, the main aim of this thesis is to examine the general assertion of Pronay, Gold and Ward and others, that the films reveal planning and reconstruction as an elitist activity with little involvement from the people to be planned.

This thesis refers to films produced before 1939 in order to put the later films in context, but concentrates on the years 1939-51. This is for two reasons: firstly, analysis of them is particularly pertinent since, as has been explained, this period was a high point of discussions and legislation for the reconstruction of Britain's built environment. Secondly, the war years and the term of the Labour government, saw a great increase in the production of these films due to government sponsorship. The year 1951 thus marks a convenient point to end this study: it is the end of the term of the post-war Labour government and the year in which the COI itself stopped making films.

Although feature films and particularly commercial newsreels tackled the subject of reconstruction, they did not tackle it in depth. Therefore this thesis will concentrate on the government films and those documentaries produced commercially. Films produced by local governments about reconstruction and redevelopment are also examined. In

⁴¹ Nick Tiratsoo, 'New Vistas', p. 136-153.

order to avoid repeating the faults of previous studies, the films in this thesis have been selected after a systematic trawl through the archives.

The detailed study of the production process is an area which has been only superficially tackled in the work of Pronay, Crofts, Gold and Ward and others, resulting in the historical distortions already outlined. While Hogenkamp's research has provided a good overall picture of COI film production, it has not given much help to those studying films on a specific policy. Therefore, as well as interpreting the 'film text' itself, thorough research has been conducted, where possible, into the production of the films. This approach assists with the interpretation of a film's message, as well as giving information about why it was produced, and what this might tell us about the history of reconstruction propaganda and reconstruction itself. Finally, research has been conducted into how the films were screened and received. This has been done for two reasons. Firstly, an examination of propaganda films is worthless without some attempt to discover how they were distributed, screened and received. Secondly, to re-examine in particular the claims made for the impact of the films on popular political consciences by contemporaries such as Roger Manvell and historians such as Pronay.

Some might question this concentration on film, arguing that it is no more helpful than any other form of contemporary media in providing insight into the complexities of planning history. However a valid reason for looking at film is that it was a relatively new medium for campaigning and discussing political and social issues in a factual format. Moreover, with specific regard to the built environment, organisations which campaigned on these issues became interested in film as a tool of public relations in the

mid-1930s. Whether or not commentators now regard film as historically valuable, at the time many people believed that this medium, and particularly documentary film, was a powerful tool of propaganda.

The potential impact of such films was also greater due to the growth in audiences. The war years saw a steady growth in the popularity of film for entertainment, the number of cinema-goers reaching a peak in 1946 when three-quarters of the population visited the cinema during the year and one-third at least once a week.⁴² Significantly, due to special agreements on government film distribution made between the state and the cinema industry titles on subjects such as housing and town planning could reach a much larger audience than had been possible before. In addition, the government's own non-theatrical distribution network meant that film not designated for the commercial cinemas, could still reach numbers far greater than had been possible through organisations such as the Workers' Film Association and the film society network.⁴³

⁴² David Docherty, David Morrison, Michael Tracey, The Last Picture Show? Britain's Changing Audiences, (1987), p. 4.

⁴³ In 1943 it has been estimated that 10 million people were reached by the MOI's mobile cinemas, a large figure but only 1% of the commercial audience, Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street, Cinema and State: The Film Industry and the British Government 1927-84, (1985) p. 119.

Chapter One: Films on Housing and Planning of the Inter-War Years.

In the 1920s and 1930s independent ‘avant-garde’ film-makers on the continent and in the USA made a group of films about the city which were poetic and even eulogistic. *Manhatta* (1921) revels in the architectural beauty and excitement of New York, images of the city juxtaposed with lines from a poem by Walt Whitman. *Regen* (Rain) (1929) subtitled a ‘cine poem’, is a melancholic song of Amsterdam during a rainstorm. This film shows in images of trees and birds that the city is a part of the natural environment. *Berlin; Die Sinfonie der GroBstadt* (1927) by contrast, displays a fascination and awe at the way a city seems to function like a vast autonomous machine. It has an ordered rhythm of movement, but this movement is benign and humane, for example the traffic stops automatically for a child to cross the road. Although there are views of poverty and inequality this is viewed as a universal condition rather than something arising directly out of the city.¹

In Britain many films were also made about the urban environment, the majority being propaganda ‘shorts’, which by contrast depicted the cities and towns of Britain as oppressive, dysfunctional and chaotic. British non-fiction film-makers of the documentary movement, which roughly corresponded with the European and American ‘avant-garde’, were very impressed with such films as *Regen*, *Manhatta* and *Berlin*. John

¹ Another important film in this group, which has not been seen by the author, is *Rien Que Les Heures* (1926), a French city film, directed by Alberto Cavalcanti. Cavalcanti was a Brazilian who came to Paris to study architecture and then became involved with film-makers of the avant-garde, notably Jean Renoir, René Clair and Jean Vigo with whom he made ‘*Rien*’. Cavalcanti came to London in 1934 and became an influential figure in the British documentary film movement.

Grierson, Britain's leading documentary theorist, thought that *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der GroBstadt* was particularly important, 'No film has been more influential, more imitated'.²

It initiated the modern fashion of finding documentary material on one's doorstep: in events which have no novelty of the unknown or romance of noble savage on exotic landscape, to recommend them. It represented the return from romance to reality.³

Ironically, it was the style and technique of *Berlin*, using visual and sound montage to give a sense of pace and movement, which was influential on important documentary films such as *Nightmail* (1936). There are no equivalent British films about the city or urban areas, the closest being travelogues such as *St. James Park* and *London on Parade*. Documentary film-makers found poetry in the sea as in *Drifters* (1929) or the countryside *O'er Hill and Dale* (1932) or exotic locations in the Empire such as *Song of Ceylon* (1934). When documentary film-makers looked at the city in *Housing Problems* (1935), one of the movement's most important works, they characteristically chose to expose the problems of slum housing. But they were suspicious of the urban environment in general. *The Londoners* (1939), the major film about the capital in this period, made to celebrate fifty years of the London County Council, warned that if a city was not regulated and controlled it could 'turn into a malignant tumour. Destroying life'.

² Forsyth Hardy (ed.) *Grierson on Documentary* (1946), p. 138.

³ Hardy, *Grierson*, p. 82.

This negative view of the city was also found in at least thirty other films of the period. An important example is the amateur propaganda film *Housing Progress* (1937) which depicted London as a city that had become chaotic and congested, but also one that was malevolent, with its slums harming the lives of the inhabitants. It advocated an escape to the hinterland or better still satellite towns built in the countryside. But despite the existence of this film and many others, some which predated *Housing Problems*, most screenings and discussions of British films about the built environment are wholly restricted to the work of the documentary film movement. This is not surprising. Films such as *Kensal House* (1938) and *The Londoners* (1939) were commercially sponsored and produced by professional film-makers working in a technically and artistically sophisticated fashion. Moreover, heavily influenced by their mentor, John Grierson, these film-makers actively sought film subjects which promoted social reform. This ideological approach, which the movement widely publicised, has not surprisingly attracted a good deal of interest and research. As a result the impression now exists that the problems of the city were first taken up as a cause by the documentary film movement. This chapter will suggest that although the sources show that documentary film-makers like Paul Rotha and John Grierson himself, lobbied organisations like the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and the Ministry of Health to make films on housing reform, the idea and initiative for film propaganda pre-dated their involvement.⁴ Moreover, that the

⁴ Paul Rotha (1907-1984), trained at the Slade school of Art from 1923-25. He was awarded the Students International Theatre Design award at the Paris Exhibition of 1925. He gave up painting for films, entering the industry in 1928 with a job at the art department of BIP in Elstree. In 1929-30 he worked on his first book *The Film Till Now* (1930). From 1932-35 he worked with John Grierson at the film section of the Empire Marketing Board where he made, *Shipyard* (1930), *Contact* (1933) and *Death on the Road*. From 1935-37 he was the Executive Producer at Strand where he made *The Face of Britain* (1934), and *The Fourth Estate*.

contribution of documentary producers in terms of number of films produced was comparatively small.

This chapter will provide a background to the examination of films on the reconstruction of the built environment between 1939 and 1951 by looking at the years 1918-1939, the period in which films on this topic were first made. It will explain how technical developments in film made 'housing' propaganda feasible for a large number of interested organisations. It will look at those organisations that became involved in producing propaganda films about slum-clearance and planning and explain why they chose to do so. Finally, it will examine a small number of representative films of the period to get a general picture of the way these issues were portrayed.

Historical background to the films of housing and town planning.

In the inter-war years housing and town planning became an area of growing interest and concern. Central government legislation such as the 1919 Addison Act and Wheatley Act of 1924 empowered local government to build houses at affordable rents and clear the slums.⁵ There was also encouragement to private companies to build cheap housing. These developments indicated that the state was beginning to recognise the inability of voluntarist solutions to provide sufficient public housing and was thus now committed to subsidising the construction of social housing- albeit indirectly, by local

⁵ The 1919 Housing Act (Addison) required local authorities to provide affordable rental housing for the working-class families. Central government provided substantial subsidies to do this.
1930 Housing Act (Greenwood Act) focused on replacing the slums with new housing.
1935 Housing Act (Hilton) encouraged local government to tackle the problem of overcrowding in urban areas.

authorities and independent housing associations. As a consequence of this, the era also saw the expansion of the independent charitable housing sector. But it should be noted that many, particularly in the Conservative Party, believed that it was private builders, not local government assisted by the state, who should be responsible for house building. As a result the 1923 Chamberlain Act tried to displace the prominent position given to government building in the 1919 Act.⁶

There was a growing movement of informed opinion that lobbied not just for more social housing but for the co-ordinated national approach by a central planning authority.⁷ As a result the period saw greater activity by campaigning groups such as the Garden Town and Country Planning Association (GTCPA) and to a lesser extent the RIBA and the Architectural Association. New groups were formed, notably the National Federation of Housing Associations (1935) and the Housing Centre. However, there was little consensus among housing campaigners about the ideal way forward for Britain. The debate ranged over various issues, such as the flat versus the house and garden, and the garden city versus urban regeneration, a process involving modern architectural styles and building techniques.

⁶ Patrick Nuttgens, The Home Front: Housing the People, (1989), p. 57.

⁷ Junichi Hasegawa, Replanning the Blitzed City Centre, (1992), p. 2.

Despite considerable slum clearance (4/5 of existing slum dwellers were rehoused between 1931-39) and the building of four million homes, much remained to be done.⁸ There was a chronic level of overcrowding, particularly in old inner city areas.⁹

Levels of overcrowding in London Boroughs in 1931

<u>Areas</u>	<u>% families</u>
Kensington	7.3%
Lambeth	6.0%
Bermondsey	13.8%
City of London	3.0%
Chelsea	5.4%

These figures are compiled from a table giving rates of overcrowding across London, based on the 1931 census, in Quigley and Goldie, Housing and Slum Clearance (1934).¹⁰

Typically these houses, as is well illustrated in the films described in this chapter, were in a very poor state, with leaking roofs, broken guttering and drainage, decaying brick work and other structural weaknesses. They were also frequently infested by house

⁸ Alan Cox, Sources for the Study of Public Housing, (1993), p. 91.
⁹ A definition of overcrowding was first arrived at in 1891 as a room containing more than two adults, children under ten counting as half, those under one year old did not count at all. This meant that a three-roomed house could contain four adults, four children and any number of children. See John Burnett, A Social History of Housing, 1815-1985 (1986), pp. 144-5.
¹⁰ Hugh Quigley and Ismay Goldie, Housing and Slum Clearance, (1934), p. 85.

lice, bed bugs and rats as graphically demonstrated in films such as *Kensington Calling* (1929). Such conditions led to an increase in communicable diseases such as TB. In response to these conditions a number of new housing associations were formed in the 1920s and 1930s, partly encouraged by the 1919 Housing Act which enabled the Treasury to give start-up grants to non-profit making housing organisations. The Kensington Housing Association (1925) and St.Pancras Housing Association (1924), (which both employed film) were two of the first Housing Associations to be formed as a result of this legislation.

Towards the end of the 1920s many organisations involved in housing began to employ film as a means of propaganda. Of at least twenty-eight films produced between 1920 and 1939 the majority were by local government or housing associations who administered public housing. Films were also produced by organisations which were campaigning more widely for better public housing such as the Housing Centre and the Health and Cleanliness Council. In addition, organisations concerned specifically with architecture and town planning considered using film propaganda. In the 1930s RIBA became interested in producing films as a way of raising awareness of the importance of the architect. Frederic Osborne of the Garden Town and Country Planning Association also looked at film as one possible medium of propaganda for garden cities but concluded that it was 'of dubious value in relation to cost'.¹¹

¹¹ 'Problems of Garden City Propaganda', 16 August 1938, Correspondence file F3, Frederic J. Osborne Archive, Welwyn Garden City Library.

Some of the most famous housing films of this period such as *Housing Problems* (1935), *Kensal House* (1938) and *The Londoners* (1939) were sponsored by commercial organisations as part of a sophisticated programme of public relations. These films were usually made on behalf of local or central government bodies to promote public housing projects and other aspects of social welfare. Finally, towards the end of this period the Ministry of Health became directly involved in the production of film propaganda to promote its work in public health and welfare such as housing.

It would be misleading to give the impression that film was the only form of campaigning used by housing charities and other organisations. Funds were raised through lectures, appeals in the press, establishing links with wealthy schools and universities, social functions, amateur dramatics etc. However, a number of factors did combine to enhance the importance of film. The introduction of smaller and cheaper amateur film gauges made film propaganda accessible to smaller housing charities and campaigning groups who could not afford 35mm.¹²

From 1922 amateur cinematography began to develop in Britain and by 1934 it was a big enough movement to support its own magazine Amateur Cine World. But, it would be wrong to say that British amateurs rushed to make documentaries and record the slums. Their main interests were holiday films, family outings, or for one of the thirty or so cine clubs that existed, making short dramas which aped feature film technique and

¹² 9.5mm film became available in 1922, 16mm in 1923, and 8mm in 1932.

style. A small number of clubs and individuals though did become interested in making films 'with a purpose'. The Manchester Film Society made films on sewage and parks for the Manchester Corporation, the Beckenham Cine club chose road safety and local social welfare provision. Other clubs made films for the National Trust and the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals. Some amateur groups aimed for less parochialism by emulating the avant-garde techniques of continental film-makers. In 1935 for example, Crystalline Films made their own London version of *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der GroBstadt* called *Symphony of a City*. And groups of left-wing film-makers such as the Film and Photo League and The Sutton Park Film Club produced films such as *Transport* (1934) and *The Worker* (1935) which were heavily influenced by the style and politics of Soviet cinema.¹³

Amateur Cine World regularly encouraged its readers to take up documentary and lend or hire their services to local charities or causes. In June 1935 the magazine asked amateur cinematographers to film the national peace-ballot then being conducted.¹⁴ The next year the editor suggested amateurs shoot films of civic life in the style of the *March of Time* newsreel: 'as far as we know there has never been any attempt at portraying not only civic amenities but at showing *why* these amenities are available..... In such a film we might be taken behind the scenes at a council meeting. We should be shown the items on the agenda and how they are dealt with.'¹⁵

¹³ The Film and Photo League's film *Transport* was described in Amateur Cine World as a 'propagandist documentary' which included scenes of squalid slums and contrasts between the wealthy and unemployed. The Film and Photo League was allied with the Left-Book Club.

¹⁴ Amateur Cine World, June 1935.

¹⁵ Editorial, Amateur Cine World, June 1936.

In 1937, documentary makers John Grierson, Evelyn Spice, Paul Rotha and Andrew Buchanan set up the Amateur Service Club, to encourage and give technical advice to amateurs 'making films of a documentary or social character'.¹⁶ To establish the club a competition offering cash prizes totalling £230 was announced on such subjects as 'Preventive Hygiene', the 'Planned Home', and the Youth Hostel movement.¹⁷ Documentary film-makers like Grierson believed that: 'The amateur cine movement has risen from the exchange of domestic felicities to a definite role in the growth of civic consciousness - an important sign of the times'.¹⁸ This was an exaggeration. A minority of amateurs like Matthew Nathan and Stanley Reed made films (featured in this study), which had a social or political purpose. Matthew Nathan was an industrial chemist whose family owned an explosives firm based in Scotland. His work in the family business gave him the financial independence to pursue his love of film-making. But most were not attracted to films of this kind. As one amateur put it, such work 'must seem a trifle drab to the majority of us who are in the business for the fun of the thing and are inclined to leave the useful jobs to those who are paid to do them.' Or as he also explained are preoccupied with the 'technicalities' and 'gadgets' of film-making.¹⁹ Those who were

¹⁶ A joint Panel of the Kine Section of the Royal Photographic Society and the British Film Institute was proposed which would facilitate 'Purpose -and service- in filming' by bringing together charitable and public service organisations, who could not afford professionally made film, with competent amateurs or societies who were 'prepared to undertake the production of suitable films in return for out-of-pocket expenses'. Editors note to 'Purpose in Filming', by Major E.C.Arden, Amateur Cine World, June 1937, p. 164.

¹⁷ World Film News, June 1937.

¹⁸ Amateur Cine World, June 1936.

¹⁹ Tony Rose, 'Amateur Films in Britain' in 'Films in 1951: A Special Publication on British Films and Film-Makers For the Festival of Britain', Sight and Sound, (1951).

prepared to produce such films did not do so for the financial reward. They gave their skills cheaply, probably only charging for materials. For such film-makers their reward was the knowledge that their work was valuable and worthy of an audience wider than their family or local cine club.

Films on the 16mm gauge (on which most of the non-35mm films in this study were shot) brought film production even into the realms of smaller non-commercial organisations like the Lambeth Housing Movement and the Housing Centre. But they still relied on the generosity of wealthy amateurs like Matthew Nathan who were willing to give the film to the organisation or just charge for materials, as 16mm was proportionally as expensive in the 1920s and 1930s as it is today.²⁰ As a result most amateur films were quite short; the usual budget for a cine club 'picture' was £100. This compared with £100,000 for a commercial feature. But in general when these films were made at cost they were affordable. For example Kensington Housing Trust's first propaganda film *Kensington Calling* (1929), which lasted for five minutes, was produced 'for the remarkably low sum of £20.00.'²¹ The Trust's second film *Contrasts in Kensington Housing* (1938) which was ten minutes long, cost the Trust £36.00.²² However, if a more ambitious project was attempted it could create a problem. When Matthew Nathan produced his 45-minute colour film *Housing Societies* (1939) for the

²⁰ In 1951 16mm cost just over £2.00 per foot. Tony Rose, *Sight and Sound*, (1951). The smaller gauges were a lot cheaper, 9.5mm was a third of the cost of 16mm.

²¹ Report of the Annual General Meeting of the Kensington Housing Trust, 4 December 1931, in the *Kensington Housing Trust Annual Report, 1930-31*, Kensington Housing Trust Papers (KHT), Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Local Studies Library.

²² Minutes of the Publicity Sub-Committee, meeting of 7 February 1938, no. 6, Ms 17950, KHT Papers.

National Federation of Housing Societies, loan copies had to be produced on black and white stock and a hire charge introduced to try 'to recoup at least a part of the considerable cost which has been involved.'²³

The increasing use of this new medium by housing charities meant that by the late 1930s a film programme could be drawn up consisting solely of such films. In October 1937 an evening film screening at the National Federation of Housing Societies, of 'Housing Society Films', was selected from titles produced by six housing charities.²⁴

The introduction of small gauge film, particularly 16mm, not only made filming cheaper and more accessible, but just as importantly it enabled films to be shown in venues outside the cinemas. This meant that film now became a medium which could be used as easily as the lantern slide. The advent of 16mm also made it possible for campaigning organisations to circumvent the cinemas which were reluctant to show anything other than commercial product. For example, in 1936 the Kensington Housing Trust Publicity Committee decided not to borrow films from the Housing Centre because of the 'difficulties of getting leave to show these in cinemas'.²⁵ Film companies notably Gaumont British, saw the potential 16mm non-theatrical film distribution. Gaumont tried

²³ Housing Centre Bulletin, 1 December 1939, Matthew Nathan Private Papers.

²⁴ The National Federation of Housing Societies screening of 26 October 1937 was selected from a group of films produced by: the Lambeth Housing Movement, the Shoreditch Housing Association Ltd, the Square Building Trust Ltd. (North Shields), Islington and Finsbury Housing Association Ltd and North St. Pancras Group of the St. Pancras House Improvement Society Ltd. The leaflet announcing this event is in the Nathan Papers.

²⁵ Minutes of the first Publicity Sub-Committee of the Kensington Housing Trust, 20 July 1936, no. 6, Ms 17950, KHT Papers.

to dominate the field, establishing a large 16mm library, producing films to add to this catalogue and selling the projectors, which they began to produce in 1932.²⁶

The rest of this section will focus on the main types of organisation which were involved in the production of films on the built environment.

Housing Charities

At least ten films were made by independent housing associations in 1918-1939, and of these at least five have survived. In addition three films, produced in Glasgow by a charity which took the children of poverty-stricken families on holiday, highlighted the difficulties of families living in slum tenements.

St. Pancras Housing Society (1924), Kensington Housing Trust (1925) and Lambeth Housing Movement (1927) were founded to ameliorate the extremely bad local housing conditions of the poor.²⁷ These associations were run by members of the clergy and middle and upper class volunteers in the long British tradition of philanthropy. It had been possible to receive government grants since 1866, but associations relied on middle and upper-class benefactors to provide most of their capital.²⁸ The organisations began in

²⁶ In 1935 the projector manufacturing section of Gaumont saw the RIBA as a likely user of 16mm and tried to interest its publicity committee in the purchase of their machines. It is likely Gaumont intended that the films on architecture it was preparing with RIBA for the cinema would also be included in the company's 16mm catalogue. Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, meeting of 7 June 1935, Vol. 2, 11.1.5, Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Archive.

²⁷ St. Pancras (1924), Kensington Housing Trust (1925), Lambeth Housing Movement (1927).

²⁸ The 1866 Labouring Dwelling Houses Act enabled housing associations to receive funding from the Public Works Loan Commissioners. In the 1920s and 1930s associations such as St. Marylebone and Lambeth and Southwark received grants from the L.C.C. In the 1974 Housing Act included financial

a modest way by purchasing small groups of dilapidated dwellings which were then reconditioned and let at low rents to former slum-dwellers. As the associations became wealthier, they were able to construct purpose - built blocks of flats, many of which still exist today. Money was raised by issuing loan stock at a low rate of interest, by shares and donations, and by subscription. The Lambeth Housing Movement also received small grants from the London County Council (L.C.C.). Finance was always fairly precarious, and associations relied on donations to fund major building projects and keep rents low. As a result fundraising was a vital aspect of the associations' work and they devised various imaginative methods of raising money both nationally and locally. A key element of propaganda was to demonstrate to potential benefactors and supporters the appalling housing conditions in which people lived. This was done by taking parties around the slums, by shows of lantern slides and lastly with film. The positive part of these tours and screenings would be views of the housing improvements and new housing projects undertaken by the association. As the charities could not afford to contract professional film-makers they relied on the generosity of amateurs to produce the films.

In addition to providing better housing many societies believed they had a campaigning role to raise general awareness of poor housing.²⁹ The Christian founders of

provisions to assist associations which was a great fillip to the movement . See Peter Jones, The Jubilee Album: A Celebration of the Housing Association Movement (1935-1985), National Federation of Housing Associations, (1985).

²⁹ By 1937 St. Pancras House Improvement Society Ltd. had produced three films: *Challenge : The War on the Slums of Somers Town* (1934), *Little Feet* and *The Terror that Walks by Night* (film by an amateur to break the taboo about the bed bug). 'Disagreeably Instructive' thought the New Statesman, quoted in Amateur Cine World, December 1941. *Paradox City* was made for the affiliated organisation the North St.Pancras Housing Society by another amateur Leonard Day.

the St.Pancras Housing Society were particularly aware of this wider role. Father Jellicoe, one of the society's founders, wanted to demonstrate that 'slum rehousing was a practical proposition'.³⁰ It was believed the example of Somers Town, the estate in Camden Town, would then encourage others to set up similar schemes elsewhere in Britain. The founders also believed that their propaganda and the success of the project would have a much wider impact on national attitudes and stir the state to embark on housing reform.

some of us [who] are striving to improve housing conditions in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, are just beginning to be in a position to ask the PM to appoint a Royal Commission to inquire into the housing situation as a whole, and particularly in the slums.³¹

The Kensington Housing Trust and the Lambeth Housing Movement were also involved in the national campaign to improve housing. For example both organisations sent delegates to GTCPA's annual conference. One of the Trust's founders and its chairman for many years, Lord Balfour of Burleigh, was a long-time campaigner for housing reform.³² In February 1927 several members of the Trust took part in a housing conference at Mansion House, from which a deputation was sent to the Prime Minister urging him to set up an enquiry into housing.³³

³⁰ John Gowing, Forever Building: A Short History of the St. Pancras Housing Society, (1954), p. 10.

³¹ Father Jellicoe in The Times, quoted in Gowing, Forever Building, p. 10.

³² Lord Balfour of Burleigh was also one of the founders of the National Federation of Housing Associations in 1935.

³³ Kensington Housing Trust also prepared a model of some local slums prior to demolition, for a display of 'Voluntary Housing Societies' at the Housing exhibition at Westminster Central Hall in December 1931.

Kensington Housing (Association) Trust

The Trust began as the Housing Sub-Committee of the Kensington Council of Social Services whose role was to tackle the Borough's housing problems. In July 1925 the Committee became an independent association with the intention of enlarging its membership in order to influence public opinion. Later the same year it purchased twenty four houses from the Great Western Railway in Wornington Road for reconditioning. The Association raised £6,404 to buy the properties. It then leased Old Oak flats for rent to low wage-earners nominated by Kensington Borough Council.³⁴

There was a wide disparity between the housing conditions experienced by the poorer inhabitants living in the overcrowded north of the Borough, known then as Notting Dale, and the wealthy neighbouring wards. In 1925 the population density of the wealthy Holland ward was 67 per acre compared with 366 per acre in Notting Dale's Golborne ward. These levels of overcrowding and the dilapidated state of the housing contributed to the poor health of the people, a factor which was recognised by Kensington Council's health visitors and sanitary inspectors who occasionally referred families to the Kensington Housing Trust for rehousing.³⁵ In 1925 overall infant mortality for London was 67/1000, for South Kensington 65/1000 but for North Kensington it was 83/1000. The incidence of TB was particularly alarming, deaths from the disease in the north of the Borough in 1925 (105) were more than double the number for the south (49). Five years

³⁴ In 1927 the Association formed the Trust with responsibility for building working-class housing in the area and in 1936, the two amalgamated under the title of the latter.

³⁵ Annual Report of the Kensington Housing trust, (1928-1929), KHT Papers.

later, despite the efforts of the Kensington Housing Trust, these wide disparities still persisted.³⁶

Comparative figures for the Health of the Population of the Royal Borough of Kensington for 1925.

<u>Death from TB</u>	<u>Scarlet fever</u> <u>notification</u>	<u>Diptheria</u> <u>notification</u>
N.Ken. 105	191	225
S.Ken. 49	74	73

Figures drawn from the Annual Report of the Kensington Housing Trust (1926).

Kensington Housing Trust raised its funds through donations, subscriptions and the sale of loan stock at a low rate of interest of 2.5% or 3.5%. Large donations were particularly important in providing building capital. For example in 1928 a donation of £21,000 from Mr J Crossfield led to the building of Crossfield House³⁷. Such gifts accounted for 1/3 of the Trust’s total assets.

³⁶ In 1929 infant deaths for London as a whole were 71 per 1000, in Kensington the average was 86/1000 but ranged from 47/1000 in the Queens Gate ward to 121 in the Golborne ward. Fifth Annual Report of the Kensington Housing Trust, (1 October 1929-30 September 1930), KHT Papers.

³⁷ Crossfield House was a home for thirty-six families, and was aimed at large families on low wages.

The Trust decentralised its fundraising by making wards in the wealthy southern parts of the borough responsible for organising their own campaigning. This method proved very successful, realising £6,010 in 1929-30, the first year of its operation.³⁸

A range of campaigning events included taking parties around North Kensington to see the work of the Trust and the borough's poor housing, charity performances of plays, balls and Bridge Drives. Lord Balfour of Burleigh, the housing campaigner, used to carry around a jar of 'bugs' from North Kensington's slums to impress upon sceptics the state of working-class dwellings.³⁹ An essential part of fundraising was the ward or drawing room meetings addressed by speakers such as the Trust's president Lord Balfour of Burleigh or Sir Raymond Unwin who would speak on Kensington's problems, town planning and related subjects. Early meetings were illustrated with lantern slides, but from 1929 these were often replaced with the Trust's own film *Kensington Calling* and later by another from the Under Forty Club.⁴⁰ *Kensington Calling* which was made by a Mr. Waley, on 'contrasting conditions in North and South Kensington', seems to have been intended for drawing room meetings.⁴¹ By 1931 it could be reported that the film in which the tenants took part had been 'shown with great success on several occasions.'⁴²

³⁸ Annual Report of the Kensington Housing Trust, (1929-1930), KHT Papers.

³⁹ 'Housing Centre Trust, Golden Jubilee Issue', Housing Review, 5, 1984, p. 158.

⁴⁰ The Under Forty Club was founded in 1928 by Cheltenham College to make young people aware of the housing problem. Education and propaganda included visits to the slums and inspection of new housing, speakers and a library. The Club also raised money for the building of homes by housing societies. Between 1928 and 1934 it raised £15,000 which was distributed to various housing societies (£500 was enough to build a flat) for their rehousing work. Information about the founding of the Housing Centre and its parent organisations comes from 'Housing Centre Trust, Golden Jubilee Issue', Housing Review, 5, 1984, pp. 158-160.

⁴¹ Annual Report of the Kensington Housing Trust, (1928-1929), KHT Papers.

⁴² Annual Report of the Kensington Housing Trust, (1930-31), KHT Papers.

In order to be effective, the Trust's propaganda had to overcome a number of prejudices and misconceptions held by the wealthier inhabitants of the borough towards their neighbours in north Kensington. Firstly, that the people of Notting Dale were a 'rough class' of 'slum dwellers', and therefore did not deserve new homes.⁴³ Secondly, that the working-class could be transferred to council housing in adjoining areas of Acton and Ealing or onto the Old Oak and Wormholt estates. The third common argument was that girls could go into service thus alleviating overcrowding, and young single men could easily find lodgings. By November 1930 it was felt that the propaganda work of the Trust had begun to make an impact. Its fifth annual report concluded that the public's attitude towards the housing problem had 'undergone a profound change' in the five years since the Trust's formation. But unfortunately this had not yet been 'transformed into action'.⁴⁴

Kensington Calling (1929)⁴⁵ is a primitive but effective survey of the poor housing of Notting Dale and the new homes provided by the Trust. It starts by locating the slums of the borough and then takes the viewer on a tour of the poor housing and examines the kind of practical and health problems the inhabitants endure as a result of these conditions. There are views of the Trust's thirty-six flat-block, Crossfield House.

⁴³ Annual Report of the Kensington Housing Trust (1928-1929), KHT Papers.

⁴⁴ Fifth Annual Report of the Kensington Housing Trust (1929-1930), KHT Papers.

⁴⁵ *Kensington Calling* (1929), black and white, 5 mins.

The film ends with scenes of new Trust building work and a request for money in the form of loan stock at 2.5% and 5% to build more housing.

Kensington Calling adopts various techniques to overcome the possible prejudices and ignorance of the audience. The exact location of the slum area must be outlined on a map at the beginning of the film to an audience who would have lived, at the most, two miles from Notting Dale; the film's final statement leaves this in no doubt: 'Help erase the blots on the honour of our (author's emphasis) Borough.'

The film adopts shock tactics to bring home to the audience the harmful affects of slum living: brief sequences of a child's coffin, the Princess Louise hospital and an undernourished baby in a nurse's arms. Sometimes the attempt to shock leads to voyeurism, a characteristic of other 'housing films' of the time such as *Houses in Lambeth*. One can almost hear the rich ladies of Queen's Gate and Redcliffe Square squealing in horrified fascination at the dead rat being held up by its tail and the slug trails on the loaf of bread. Such titillation helped to give the film appeal, but it could also be dangerous in reinforcing the perception of the slums as an alien world.

But there is also an attempt to humanise and simplify the ramifications of living under slum conditions by demonstrating the practical difficulties experienced by mothers. The scenes of a mother washing dishes and then her baby in the same basin, using water hauled up from the cellar, is a subtle means of evoking the audience's sympathy. Even if

members of the wealthy Kensington audience did not do much of the housework or the rearing of the children themselves, they could begin to understand what ‘slum living’ meant through observing such universal activity. The woman is no longer a stigmatised ‘slum dweller’, but a mother trying to rear her children and keep her house clean in the face of cramped conditions and many practical difficulties. Thus these scenes contradicted widely - held prejudices that the poor were somehow inherently dirty and feckless.⁴⁶

But we can see that despite the mother’s efforts rearing healthy children is arduous under such conditions. Sub-titles for views of a toddler with her doll ask ‘Must the mothers of the next generation bring up children in these old conditions?’ The film sets up a dialogue with the audience to challenge its ignorance and prejudices. At one point a ‘guessing game’ to establish the levels of overcrowding per house is played out in which a progressively higher number forms on the screen. More subtle still are the views of the dustbin overloaded with food cans ‘with no cupboard and cooking range the ill-housed mother relies on these.....Extravagant, yes-but what can she do?’

During the ‘tour’ of Crossfield House a heart-warming story unfolds as a mother and her children arrive to be re-housed. A little girl runs out and asks ‘Are all these rooms ours ?’ The scenes of the building work and further slums demonstrate how these

⁴⁶ George Orwell powerfully describes the widespread prejudice held by the English middle and upper-classes that the working class were ‘inherently dirty’ and that this was a state arrived at out of choice rather than necessity. Apparently another commonly cliché was that miners did not wash ! George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937). References in 1978 Penguin edition, p. 33, and pp. 112-114.

‘happy endings’ may be repeated. Such scenes were found in all housing association ‘fund-raisers’, their purpose being to reward the benefactors for their generosity. The Trust’s annual reports occasionally employed a similar technique by printing ‘before and after letters’ from grateful tenants of Trust homes.⁴⁷

Despite all its efforts, in 1937-38 it was calculated that there were still 2,529 people reported to be living in overcrowded conditions.⁴⁸ But unfortunately the Trust did not have enough money to maintain its programme of building work. In the Trust’s efforts to raise more money there was a renewed interest in film. The Publicity Committee explored borrowing Housing Centre films and there was also a suggestion to show the new gas company films⁴⁹ at ward meetings.⁵⁰

In July 1937 it was decided that a new film was needed for the winter season of drawing room meetings around the borough. This time the Trust was advised by the documentary film-maker Evelyn Spice, of the GPO Film Unit, to use Ace Movies.⁵¹ Ace Movies was an amateur cine club based in Streatham. From 1929 to 1935 the group had produced ten full film dramas and was considered one of the most competent amateur clubs in existence and had formed a new documentary section which was hoping ‘to win

⁴⁷ Annual Report of the Kensington Housing Trust (1928-1929), KHT Papers.

⁴⁸ Brochure for the Trust, 1937/38, KHT Papers.

⁴⁹ During the 1930s the Gas industry started to produce its own films. Some were straightforward publicity films but others were made to enhance the public image of the industry by covering an important social issue such as slum clearance or the fight against malnutrition. A description of this strategy and the films is fully covered later in this chapter on pp. 55-63.

⁵⁰ Minutes of the Ward Convenor sub-committee, meeting of 7 October 1936, Ms. 17954, KHT Papers.

⁵¹ Minutes of the Ward Convenor sub-committee, meeting of 13 July 1937, Ms. 17954, KHT Papers.

its spurs with a propaganda film for the Kensington Housing Trust Ltd, dealing with the housing problems of North Kensington.’⁵² Channon Wood was to direct the film with a commentary by the Trust’s President, Lord Balfour of Burleigh. The ten-minute film was ready for screening in February 1938 and had cost the Trust £36.⁵³ *Contrasts in Kensington Housing* was soon raising funds for the Trust. In March a sneak preview of the film was held at the Redcliffe ward meeting at which sherry was provided and money which had been pledged collected.⁵⁴

Contrasts in Kensington Housing (1938)⁵⁵ is more sophisticated and better made than *Kensington Calling* but follows the same format; a tour of the slums followed by uplifting views of new Trust housing and re-housed families. The film also dwells on the health problems created by the slums but this time uses comparative statistics to highlight the local incidence of TB and infant mortality. As in the earlier film, shocking images are used to reinforce the statistics, in this case a TB sufferer is carried away to hospital by an ambulance. A woman’s difficulties in carrying out normal house management and child-rearing are demonstrated by showing water collecting, washing etc. in a two roomed basement flat. Again there is a degree of voyeurism in this film. In the basement flat the camera closes up on the bugs crawling up the wall, a finger stabs one bug, smearing it across the paint work. Notting Dale is depicted as remote, even exotic. The opening shot of the roof tops cuts to high angle views looking down on to a

⁵² *Amateur Cine World*, November 1937.

⁵³ Minutes of Sixth Publicity Committee, meeting of 7 February 1938, Ms 17950, KHT Papers.

⁵⁴ Minutes of Ward Convenor sub-committee, meeting of 22 March 1938, Ms 17958, KHT Papers.

⁵⁵ *Contrasts in Kensington Housing* (1938), black and white, 10 min.

‘Rag Fair’, where the camera observes a number of human curiosities: such as a chestnut seller and an old woman being pushed in a bath chair. These scenes have no relevance to the film’s narrative and can only be seen as an attempt to add interest and colour for the audience.

What is new in this film is an attempt to involve the inhabitants of the slums by allowing them to ‘speak’ with the audience. A young man scratches the wall to show the decaying brickwork and a woman pulls on some loose drain pipes. Their words to the audience are ‘voiced’ via subtitles: “The brickwork is rotten”...he ‘tells’ us...”You can rub it away wherever you like”. Similarly, three women standing on a doorstep complain through the sub-titles of the high rents that have to be paid for such poor accommodation: “I pay 18/- a week for two rooms”...”No, there’s no bath. We have to go to the public baths”. The mother in the basement flat explains to camera how difficult it is to keep her rooms clean: “The walls are infested with bugs- Nothing I can do to get rid of them”. It is possible that Ace Movies was influenced by *Housing Problems* (1935) in making this film and tried to give the tenants a voice. This film allows the audience to compare the exorbitant rents charged by the slum landlords and those charged by the Trust.

From 1938 to 1939 the Trust became increasingly keen on using film propaganda. The Publicity Committee suggested it might be ‘useful propaganda’ to slip the Trust’s films into members’ private shows of their own films at parties.⁵⁶ Members of the

⁵⁶ Minutes of the Eighth Publicity Sub-Committee, meeting of 30 May 1938, KHT Papers.

Committee were sent detailed information on the Trust's propaganda films to encourage members to use the films at small meetings.⁵⁷ In January 1939 the Publicity Committee discussed ways of making greater use of the Trust's film [probably '*Contrasts*'], which was 'still up to date and very good propaganda'. As well as in Trust publicity, the Committee was to ask if the Housing Centre would include the title in its film list.⁵⁸ From the release of the Trust's first film *Kensington Calling* in 1929 till the autumn of 1939, films were shown twenty times out of sixty Trust meetings. The Trust's film propaganda was a successful enterprise. Not only were the films a cost effective way of raising funds but they contributed to a change in attitude by the public.

Housing Centre

The Housing Centre was a voluntary organisation founded in 1934 as a focus for publicity, information and research on housing. It was formed from four organisations which had been started to promote the work of housing societies and raise the public's awareness of the need for a renewed effort in house building and reform after the slump of 1930 and the loss of momentum in the government's post-war housing drive. The most notable of these organisations were the New Homes For Old Exhibition Committee, under the chairmanship of the architect Elizabeth Denby, and the Under Forty Club, run by Miss Faithless, headmistress of Cheltenham College.⁵⁹ Other founding members were

⁵⁷ Minutes of the Ninth Publicity Sub-Committee, meeting of 11 July 1938, KHT Papers.

⁵⁸ Minutes of the Eleventh Publicity Sub-Committee, meeting of 2 January 1939, KHT Papers.

⁵⁹ The New Homes For Old Exhibition started in 1931 at the Building Trades Exhibition in Olympia. Designed to promote the work of voluntary housing societies and the problems of British housing in general, it included a full-sized slum house with a dustbin to provide a realistic smell.

Anne Lupton of the Fulham House Improvement Society, Lady Elizabeth Pepler, Lord Balfour of Burleigh and Sir Reginald Rowe.⁶⁰ The Centre's first base was in two cottages at the Aldwych, the winning entry in a competition by the Building Centre to build two working-class dwellings for under £450.00. It described its role as 'working for the improvement of housing conditions through educational work and research'.⁶¹ The Centre organised touring exhibitions and talks, lunch time lectures at the headquarters in Suffolk Street, published a Bulletin which later became the Housing Review, and supplied portable exhibition material, including slides and films, to various other groups. From the beginning, film formed an important part of its propaganda. The first film connected with the Centre was the 'shockingly realistic' Under Forty club film which was enthusiastically shown around the country by Club members at schools, colleges, drawing room meetings and on one occasion to Ministry of Health officials. Between 1934-5 it was estimated to have been seen by at least 4,000 people at seventeen different locations.⁶² The Centre commissioned its first film, *Housing Progress*, in 1934, followed by *Rural Housing* in 1937. It also held regular screenings of other films (in 1936 twenty-seven shows of housing films were held at Suffolk street),⁶³ provided technical advice to other organisations wanting to use film, and supplied a list of suitable housing films available in Britain.

⁶⁰ Sir Reginald Rowe was a disciple of Octavia Hill. He was the Housing Centre's first Chair and the first Chairman of the National Federation of Housing Societies.

⁶¹ PRO HLG 101/599 Eighth annual report of the Housing Centre, 1942-43.

⁶² The Under Forty Club Annual Report, 1934-5, p. 7-8, Housing Centre Trust archives.

⁶³ Housing Centre Second Annual Report, 1936-37, p.5, Housing Centre Trust archives.

Much of the Centre's film work was carried out by the Matthew Nathan. He produced both of its films and organised and projected many of the shows held at Suffolk Street which staff of the Centre thought had 'done much to make the Centre known and popular to other organisations.'⁶⁴ Nathan was a competent amateur film-maker, whose work attracted the praise of professionals such as the documentary and 'nature' film-maker Mary Field.⁶⁵ Unusually for an amateur film-maker prints of his films for the Centre were acquired for preservation by the BFI in 1951, long before amateur films were considered of much archival and historical interest.⁶⁶ His work was recognised by his peers in the amateur film movement and he received various prizes such as an award from the Institute of Amateur Cinematography in 1933 for *Westminster in Winter*. During the war, when he was involved in research and development of the jet engine, he was given the important task of filming some of this work and early prototype jet aircraft.⁶⁷

Nathan was very interested in architecture and planning, and on his travels in Europe both before and after the war, he filmed and photographed various buildings and housing projects. His photographs of the Cité de La Muette at Drancy in Paris was used

⁶⁴ Housing Centre Bulletin, December 1938, Nathan Papers.

⁶⁵ Mary Field was well known at the time for her '*Secrets of Nature*' series for GB Instructional. During the war she directed *The Development of the English Town* (1943), and after the war became associated with films for children.

⁶⁶ Miss Solomon, Housing Centre Trust to Matthew Nathan, 19 September 1951, Matthew Nathan Papers.

⁶⁷ These films are held in the Imperial War Museum's (IWM) Film and Video Archive. *Power Jets Film* (1945), IWM Cat. No. MGH 4350; *Britain's Jet Planes* (1945), No. MGH 4351; *616 Squadron* (1945), No. MGH4352. Note the dates for these films may not be correct.

in Elizabeth Denby's book Europe Rehoused (1938). He also made a film of a re-housing scheme in Lyon called *Sky-Scrapers in France* (1937).⁶⁸

His interests brought him into contact with the housing campaign groups based in London for whom he became a vital source of help and advice on films. Between 1934, when Nathan began work on *Housing Progress* for the Housing Centre, and December 1939, when *Housing Societies* was completed for the National Federation of Housing Societies, he had produced five films on 16mm for various pressure groups.⁶⁹ Nathan also took pictures for the Kensington Housing Trust's display in the New Homes for Old exhibition in 1936 and supervised numerous film screenings, for example at a Trust meeting in North Kensington in May 1935, he provided the housing films to accompany talks by Lord Balfour of Burleigh and the Bishop of Kensington. His work with the housing groups brought him into contact with the English Speaking Union, the Girl Guides Association and the Nursery School Association, the latter co-opting him onto their publicity committee.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ At the end of the war Nathan shot some unique colour footage of pre-fabs in London and of the reconstruction exhibition held in Coventry in 1945 to publicise the city's rebuilding proposals. *Pre-Fab, Coventry Ruins* (1945), IWM cat. No. MGH 4354; *London Builds Again* (1947), IWM No. MGH 4355.

⁶⁹ *Housing Progress* (1937), sp: Housing Centre, 16mm, black and white, 17 mins, IWM Cat. No. MGH 4373.

Rural Re-Conditioning (1938), sp: Housing Centre, 16mm, black and white, 12 mins, IWM Cat. No. MGH 4374.

Housing Societies (1939), sp: NFHS, 16mm, colour, 45 mins. IWM No. MGH 4357.

North Kensington Nursery School (1937), sp: Nursery School Association.

Girl Guides Films (1938), sp: Girl Guides Association.

⁷⁰ By June 1939 Nathan had made five colour films for the Girl Guides Association.

Housing Progress (1937)⁷¹ with its factual style and long explanatory inter-titles, is really a film lecture. It would have required very little explanation but is likely to have been of little interest to general audiences. However, the Housing Centre was very pleased with the film, commissioning Nathan to make another on the problems of rural housing and raising the money for its production from among its membership.⁷² Reflecting the concerns of the Housing Centre, the film is far more wide-ranging than any others of this period. In discussing the limitations of current slum clearance and city centre redevelopment schemes, and advocating the creation of satellite towns, it anticipates by five years *When We Build Again* (1942) which draws similar conclusions.

Despite its empirical approach, much of the film's imagery and symbolism is emotive and common to other housing films of the period. Nathan's camera takes the audience on a tour of the slums in which we observe the details of slum living and poor housing conditions. The film begins with a rooftop sequence highlighting the density of the housing. The camera descends to ground level and high-angle views accentuate the impenetrable nature of the slum tenements. The houses block out the light and seem to tower like oppressive prison walls over the children playing in the streets. The camera then points out details of the slum areas: the broken decaying walls, the lines of washing hung next to grimy walls, the packed housing, a rubbish strewn back-yard, narrow streets and lack of play areas for the children. The camera also makes telling observations about the impact of these conditions on the people's lives: the children are grubby and seem to

⁷¹ *Housing Centre* (1937), black and white, silent, 17 mins.

⁷² Housing Centre Bulletin, no.20, 1 July 1937, Nathan Papers.

play in a violent and unruly way; the mothers appear unhappy and either aimless or slightly harassed. Nathan's camera makes pointed references to the health of people in the slums. One toddler who stares at the camera has a squint, and there is a particularly grim moment when a coffin is carried out to a waiting horse-drawn hearse.

By contrast the scenes of the new housing show the estates bathed in sunshine, the flowers in full bloom, trees and curtains wave in the cleansing breeze. The children are well behaved and smartly dressed; boys in school uniform are seen playing football. Women relax in the sunshine, chatting with their friends or with their children on their laps. Family life is now re-established and a serene picture of domesticity pervades. A common scene shows mothers tending their children in clearly improved surroundings, bathing them in a 'plumbed-in' bath, feeding them at the table.

These implicit references to the harmful physical and social affects of slum living and the corresponding benefits of re-housing were explicitly related in the dramatised film *Silver Lining* (1935) by the Health and Cleanliness Council.⁷³ As a result of re-housing the family is closer and more harmonious, even their appearance and dress seems to be improved as a result of their new surroundings.

Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA)

⁷³ This is a sound film, but the only print currently available is silent.

In the 1930s RIBA began to explore the possibilities of producing film propaganda. In particular the Institute saw it as a way of raising the status of the architect whom it was thought was 'losing ground' in British building projects.⁷⁴ On the one hand legislation encouraging private enterprise to build homes for rent meant that work normally carried out by architects was being undertaken by builders, while in the area of town and country planning the architect was being replaced by the engineer and the surveyor.⁷⁵ Film was first mentioned in this context in October 1933 during a meeting of the Public Relations Committee when it was proposed that a film be made on architecture.⁷⁶ As a result of these discussions the feature film director, Anthony Asquith, was approached.⁷⁷ Asquith was interested in the project and suggested that either RIBA employ him directly or he could ask his then employers (Gainsborough Pictures) if they would be interested in making a film for the general public which RIBA's Public Relations committee would produce.⁷⁸ Although this project went no further, RIBA's interest in film coincided with an approach from the film company Gaumont British Instructional who wanted assistance with a short film on the 'science and beauty of domestic architecture' to be included in the nationally shown 'screen magazine', the Gaumont Mirror. One suggestion was that the film be introduced by a

⁷⁴ Memo by Maxwell Fry to the Public Relations Committee, Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, 1933, Vol. 1, 11.1.5, RIBA Archive.

⁷⁵ T. Alwyn Lloyd to the Secretary of RIBA, meeting of 27 June 1933, Minutes of the Public Relations Committee Minutes, Vol. 1, RIBA Archive.

⁷⁶ Memo on Fields of Work and Statistics, 6 October 1933, Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, Vol. 1, RIBA.

⁷⁷ Puffin (Anthony) Asquith, born 1902, was the son of Herbert Henry Asquith, the Liberal politician who became Prime Minister in 1908.

⁷⁸ Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, meeting of 1 December 1933, Vol. 1, RIBA.

woman architect and should demonstrate practical examples of the ‘modern trend’.⁷⁹ RIBA accepted the invitation and asked Maxwell Fry, the celebrated modern architect, to draft a scenario. Interestingly a few years later it was Fry’s pioneering housing estate in west London that was featured in *Kensal House* (1938).⁸⁰ To guide the project, a Film Sub-Committee was formed in June 1935⁸¹ and by its third meeting, the initial plan for one short film had grown into a series of five 300ft films for the Gaumont Magazine, covering ‘Town planning, slum clearance, the evolution of domestic planning, sun and health, and children’.⁸² In the summer of 1935 the sub-committee selected the houses to be filmed for the first of these shorts, on the ‘House through the Ages’.⁸³ Later Gaumont British chose the RIBA building and its activities as the subject for one of the shorts.⁸⁴ There were also discussions with the BFI in response to a new demand for short films of an educational nature on architecture.⁸⁵

From a paper given at the International Congress of Architects in Rome in 1935, one can form an impression of the kind of image of the profession that RIBA was hoping to project. The author advocated that publicity should show the trained architect as the only person who could ‘deliver the goods’ and convey the idea that the architect worked for ‘service to the community rather than profit’. This could partly be achieved by

⁷⁹ Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, meeting of 8 June 1933, Vol. 1, RIBA.

⁸⁰ Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, meeting of 8 June 1933, Vol. 1, RIBA.

⁸¹ Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, meeting of 7 June 1935, Vol.2, RIBA. The committee members were as follows; Judith Ledeboer, Mr R.A.Duncan, Mr F.R.S. Yorke, Mr M.L.Anderson, and Basil Ward. The following month G.A.Jellicoe and E.K. Jarfett were co-opted on to the committee.

⁸² Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, meeting of 19 July 1935, Vol.2, RIBA.

⁸³ Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, meeting of 11 October 1935, Vol.2, RIBA.

⁸⁴ Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, meeting of 13 March 1936, Vol.2, RIBA.

⁸⁵ Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, meeting of 8 February 1935, Vol. 2, RIBA.

improving the people's architectural awareness and taste, by showing films in which good and bad architecture were compared.⁸⁶

In 1936 Paul Rotha was co-opted on to the Film Sub-Committee.⁸⁷ It is likely that he was a major contributor to a memo produced in May 1936 proposing the production of documentary and instructional films on architecture. The memo recommended that documentary film would be a good vehicle to promote architecture as it was a style in which British film-makers excelled and it was currently reaching a wide public in the cinemas. The authors suggested that the building industry pool its resources with RIBA to produce a coherent group of films for public education in architecture and building. The building industry was to finance the film programme (estimated at about £7,500) which RIBA would co-ordinate. The programme was to start with a major documentary on architecture and the building industry which would be screened in commercial cinemas. This was to be followed by a series of shorter films on different aspects of the industry and relating to the particular concerns of each organisation which financed the films. These would be shown non-theatrically. The Association of Realist Film Producers was to be the consultant and producer for the project.⁸⁸

H.Bryant of the Building Industry National Council had misgivings. Firstly, he thought that the building industry was unlikely to think it had responsibility to finance

⁸⁶ Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, meeting of 30 July 1935, Vol. 2, RIBA.

⁸⁷ Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, meeting of 10 October 1936, Vol.2, RIBA.

⁸⁸ Memorandum for the Production of a Programme of Documentary and Instructional Films on Architecture (D.724/6), submitted to the meeting of 8 May 1936, Public Relations Committee Minutes, Vol.3, RIBA.

films designed to publicise the architectural profession. Secondly, he was sceptical about the value of film as a propaganda medium.⁸⁹ Writing to RIBA's Executive Council, he explained:

Whatever advantages the documentary film may have for publicising architecture (and I believe that solely on the higher education side a most practical field is available) my own public relations committee when the question was considered by them some little time ago were not generally impressed with its possibilities for the industry as a whole, particularly having regard to the very heavy costs falling upon the industry from its production and circulation.⁹⁰

As a result of this letter and general doubts about the ambitious nature of the proposals, a modified programme was later put forward. However, despite repeated attempts to set it in motion no films were ever started, due largely to the difficulty of obtaining finance. The Films sub-committee pursued other ways of using film: for example obtaining permission from the London County Council to show 16mm films at RIBA; preparing an index of films on architecture and building; issuing certificates of approval for films considered relevant to architects and builders, and collaborating with other organisations such as the Housing Centre, which were also keen on film. However, as none of these initiatives was a substitute for producing films, RIBA was very excited when, in February 1939, it received an offer from the Gas industry to finance a film on its

⁸⁹ Letter from H.B.Bryant to Executive Council (25 May 1936), Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, meeting of 17 June 1936, Vol.3, RIBA.

⁹⁰ Letter from H.B.Bryant to Executive Council, minutes of the Public Relations Committee, meeting of 17 June 1936, Vol.3, RIBA.

behalf. As Basil Ward, the secretary of the PR committee noted, this offer provided a means to put the 1936 programme for documentary films into effect.⁹¹

Before the Executive Council accepted the Gas industry offer, it asked Basil Ward to produce a memo on the matter. On the basis of his recommendations the offer was accepted, and an ad-hoc film sub-committee formed to oversee the project and deal directly with the film section of the Gas industry.⁹² Basil Ward had three main reasons for accepting. First, that films sponsored by the gas industry would put architecture and the issues that RIBA wanted to promote, at their heart. Previous films sponsored by Gas on issues such as re-housing (*Housing Problems*) and nutrition (*Enough to Eat*) had demonstrated that propaganda for the use of gas 'is purely incidental and inferred rather than stated'. Members of the Public Relations and Film Sub-committees had been particularly impressed that the film most recently sponsored by Gas for the L.C.C., *The Londoners* (1939), had contained no reference to Gas at all, apart from a statement in the titles saying that it had been presented to the L.C.C. by the Gas industry. This led on to Ward's second point, that the films were of a high standard and attracted considerable critical praise and press interest; the inference being that such a film would not only present RIBA's arguments effectively but bring prestige to the Institute. Finally, the quality of gas films had led to wide exposure through commercial screenings and even

⁹¹ Memo by Hon. Sec. of PR Committee, Mr Basil R. Ward, Proposed Film on Architecture, submitted to the Executive Committee of 6 February 1939, Minutes of the Council (October 1938-December 1942), RIBA.

⁹² Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, meeting of 22 February 1939, Vol. 4, RIBA. The committee members were Mr A.L. Roberts, Mr R. Henniker (Convenor) Miss J. Ledebøer, Basil Ward and the secretary.

foreign showings. Even if this did not happen for RIBA's film, it was guaranteed a wide distribution through the Gas industry's non-theatrical network at Gas showrooms and other venues. The Gas industry could guarantee that one of their films would be seen by approximately 2,000,000 people per year, far in excess of the 280,000 who had visited RIBA's travelling exhibition.

Although Ward wanted a film that would be good propaganda for the architectural profession, he recognised that Gas would want the film to help promote their industry, thus they would be interested in subject matter such as the redevelopment of central urban areas, the construction of satellite towns and other housing work, which could be linked in a subtle way to the increasing use of gas as fuel. Interestingly Ward did not seem to object to this as long as there were safeguards to ensure that the film dealt with these subjects in a 'broad architectural and social way' and that the public received a 'true picture of the work of the architect'.

Ward and his colleagues on the PR and Film committees were so excited by the project that they suggested it might be presented at New York's forthcoming World Fair, 'where it would be representative of the [architectural] profession in this country, and would be seen not only by the great mass of general public but also by professional groups concerned with architecture.' This would form a valuable architectural counterpoint to an American film which was currently being produced [probably *The*

City] for the Fair on city planning.⁹³ The project was never made in this form, but as will be seen in chapter 4, it was eventually realised in the Gas-funded film by Paul Rotha *Land of Promise* (1946).

Corporate and Industrial Sponsorship

In the inter-war years there was a growing involvement by commerce and industry in the production of 'public interest' films. Although these films usually only formed a small part of a company's total film output, they often had an artistic, social and even political impact which was wide and long-lasting. For many years British companies had experimented with film. In 1904 the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) and, not long after, Cadbury's had made short films which were then screened during regular factory lantern shows. But it was not until the arrival of sound in 1928 that companies such as these began to produce films in large numbers to promote their products. Most of these films were straightforward advertisements, but there was also a trend for making films which had a larger appeal and in which the product appeared to take second place to a more entertaining theme or some topic of human interest. For example Cadbury made travelogues about the Gold Coast which promoted cocoa obliquely by showing the harvesting of the bean and the lives and customs of local people.⁹⁴ Some could be even less directly linked such as *Country Fare* about agriculture. The CWS film, *Homes of*

⁹³ Basil Ward's Memo on Proposed Film on Architecture, 6 February 1939, Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, Vol. 4, RIBA.

⁹⁴ *The Gold Coast* a 20 minute sound film 'about native life and industries on the Gold Coast of British West Africa', and *Country Fare* a 19 minute sound 'documentary film on some aspects of agriculture, such as the production of eggs, milk and barley to meet the growing demands for foods of this kind'. 'Cadbury's Film Library', World Film News, August 1937.

Britain (ca. 1930s) was a domestic travelogue which showed a variety of beautiful British ‘homes’ before the final scene in which people in an ordinary suburban house take tea (Co-op) in their garden. Shorter advertisements were generally screened in cinemas (for which the cinemas charged a fee), but longer films such as *Gold Coast* and *Homes of Britain* were distributed primarily for free or a small charge, to groups of private individuals for non-theatrical screenings. In 1937 this non-theatrical audience was estimated to be around 20 million.⁹⁵ One of its biggest elements were religious groups but many other types of organisations had begun to run film shows on a regular basis following the advent of small gauge film, such as Women’s Institutes, Townswomen’s Guilds, girls clubs, the British Legion, and political parties and groups. In order to foster this audience, companies made loan copies of their films on 16mm and Cadbury even printed copies on 9.5mm. This service was not cheap. In 1934 Cadbury estimated that it was reaching an audience of 350,000 at a cost of between seven and ten pence per head.⁹⁶ However, there was little altruism involved. Companies who provided this service produced entertaining films tailored to their audience but they were nonetheless a form of promotion. The companies’ products were subtly placed within the context and narrative of the film while the process of providing the film in the first place was of benefit to the company’s image.

Those attending performances held primarily for the showing of sponsored films know what to expect, have nearly always received the show for nothing and quite naturally are favourably disposed towards the publicist who has provided

⁹⁵ Sydney Box, Film Publicity, a Handbook on the Production and Distribution of Propaganda Film, (1937), p. 34.

⁹⁶ P. Swann, The British Documentary Film Movement: 1926-1946 (New York, 1989), p.96

them with free entertainment or instruction.⁹⁷

Films made about the built environment and other social issues such as education and nutrition, constituted the subtlest form of commercial advertising, described as ‘promotion by association’.⁹⁸ Here the company would make a film on behalf of a non-profit making organisation or in some cases a government body, in which there was no direct link with their products. The gas industry has become particularly associated with this kind of film, but in fact a number of other companies sponsored similar productions including Shell, ICI, Pearl Assurance and the Central Electricity Board. It was also quickly realised that the goodwill generated by the sponsorship of public interest films was in itself an extremely effective form of promotion. Moreover, a wide distribution could be achieved on the basis of a film’s artistic and technical merit. At Shell, the in-house film team was encouraged to produce extremely high quality films on technical and scientific subjects which often had only a passing reference to Shell products as in the case of *Transfer of Power* (1940) about the scientific principle of levers.

The commercial sponsorship of films on ‘housing problems’ was partly a reflection of a long tradition of paternalism in British industrial life. For many years British industrial and commercial companies with a paternal and progressive attitude to employees’ welfare had built and managed good quality housing for their workers. Indeed scenes of one of the first of these schemes, built by David Dale and Robert Owen

⁹⁷ Box, *Film Publicity*, p. 21.

⁹⁸ Box, *Film Publicity*, p. 48.

to house cotton workers at the mill in New Lanark, was cited as an early example of a humanitarian approach to workers' housing in the film *Development of the English Town* (1943).⁹⁹ Some companies realised that wider knowledge of their philanthropy would be good for public relations and included scenes of social welfare provisions, including employees' housing, in films. In 1931 Lever Brothers made a film of its soap-producing factory at Port Sunlight, which included scenes of the housing, recreational and health care facilities it had built for its workers in the 'village' near the works.¹⁰⁰ Cadbury's films *Work-a-day* and *A Day at Bournville* describe the housing and recreational facilities provided for the firm's employees in the Bournville village as well as the production of chocolate. Cadbury later produced the 'public interest' film *When We Build Again* (1942) [see below chapter 4] resulting from their research into social housing and planning in the Birmingham area. After the war *Street Prospect* (1947) on the Trust's research and work into landscape architecture was also made available.

In the case of the Quaker-owned firm of Cadbury, its sponsorship of films on aspects of the built environment was a reflection of its research and interest in the subject. But the major sponsor of films on slum clearance in this period was the gas industry. Although the Gas Light and Coke Co, which supplied the fuel to London, had built its own workers' flats, the company had mainly commercial reasons for sponsoring films on

⁹⁹ Between 1784 and 1796 a town was built incorporating low rent houses, a school, bakery, vegetable market, grocery shop, and wash house for the 1340 (750 children) employees. New Lanark was built on the upper reaches of the river Clyde and remains, after refurbishment, as a monument to Owen's vision to this day.

¹⁰⁰ The village of Port Sunlight was founded by Lord Lever near Liverpool in 1888.

slum clearance.¹⁰¹ By the 1930s gas found itself in serious competition from electricity. A.P.Ryan from 1931 and then S.C.Leslie from 1936 developed a sophisticated public relations campaign in which film formed a central role.¹⁰² Leslie recalled that there were three main reasons for the Gas, Light and Coke company's sponsorship of documentary films. First, to modernise the image of gas 'by associating it with ideas of public service and contemporary problems'.¹⁰³ Second, and related, to 'combat the prevalent identification of electricity with the millennium as accepted in the London Labour party - then running County Hall and so the G.C.L.C.C.'s [Gas, Light and Coke Co.'s] major customer.'¹⁰⁴ Socialist boroughs in the East End were at the time building new housing estates solely fuelled by electricity as part of their slum clearance programmes. There were even cases of local authorities filling existing gas pipes with cement.¹⁰⁵ Although the Governor of the company, Sir David Milne-Watson, who had hired Ryan and Leslie, was a Tory, he perfectly understood the strategy of identifying with a progressive housing policy in order to outflank the electricity industry. In fact so determined were they to woo the ruling Labour group in County Hall, that the company even issued a Moholy-Nagy poster, with the slogan 'Helping To Build the New London' which was 'helpful not only to gas but inevitably the ruling party at County Hall'.¹⁰⁶ The managers even resisted

¹⁰¹ The Commercial Gas Company had built houses in Malham Gardens, East India Dock Rd, for its workforce, benefiting from subsidies available to public utility societies in the 1919 Housing Act. Cox, Public Housing, p. 10.

¹⁰² Before A.P. Ryan joined Gas he had been the press officer at the Empire Marketing Board (EMB). Its aim was to modernise the image of gas in the face of the competition from electricity. At the EMB a prestigious public relations campaign had been developed in which film played a central role in promoting trade with the empire.

¹⁰³ S.C.Leslie to Paul Rotha, 21 November 1970, Folder 9, Box 67, Paul Rotha collection, 2001, UCLA.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Swann, The British Documentary, p. 102.

¹⁰⁶ Leslie to Rotha, 21 November 1970, Rotha collection.

pressure from Conservative Central Office to make a film which might redress the balance. Not only did they reject this request but chose to sponsor *The Londoners*, (1939) a film celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the London County Council, which did much to promote the ruling Labour party's work for the city, particularly regarding slum clearance and education. In singling out the 'performances' of Labour politicians, such as Herbert Morrison, one reviewer revealed the film's bias.¹⁰⁷

The third reason claimed by Leslie for sponsoring such documentary films was a 'personal bonus' for himself to make what he regarded as a contribution towards lifting 'us out of the morass of poverty in which so many were floundering - at least to the extent of making the facts better known'.¹⁰⁸

The Gas, Light and Coke Company also made more direct efforts to foster good relations, for example by making an annual subsidy of £500 to the Housing Centre. The public relations professional Mike Lewis-Thompson, who worked with Leslie, recalled this as a 'gesture' which 'was not altogether disinterested, since the company had an obvious interest in selling its wares in the new housing estates which began to shoot up as a result of the Centre's activities'.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ From an unsourced review in the BFI Programme Notes for a screening of the film in the Summer of 1997.

¹⁰⁸ Leslie to Rotha, 21 November 1970, Paul Rotha collection.

¹⁰⁹ Mike Lewis-Thompson, *On the Record: an Interim Memoir*, (1960), p. 28. Lewis-Thompson worked in the PR section of the Gas, Light and Coke Co. From 1936-39. He became genuinely interested in housing reform and became a member of the Housing Centre's Publicity Committee.

Gas films had been occasionally shown in cinemas but the bulk of their distribution was through its own non-theatrical screenings in showrooms elsewhere, as well as being available for loan to any interested organisations. In 1938 it was estimated that through the gas distribution network alone, the films were being seen by an audience of one million.¹¹⁰

The first programme of gas-sponsored films included the ground-breaking documentary *Housing Problems* (1935) which worried some people in the industry. Although Leslie described it as ‘strong meat’, the controversy created by the film was not due so much to its exposure of slum conditions in London’s East End as to the fact that it was ‘such a strikingly long way from salesmanship as previously understood’.¹¹¹ As a result of these concerns Leslie sought another subject which would be better received by his colleagues. In the end he hit upon nutrition and food as contemporary social problems which could also be easily allied with gas. The gas film programme of 1936-7 thus consisted of *Enough to Eat* (described as a scientific examination of the social problems of nutrition) as well as some more directly sales-orientated films on recipes and a straightforward advertisement by Publicity Films.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Swann, *The British Documentary Film*, p. 103.

¹¹¹ S.C. Leslie to Paul Rotha, 21 November 1970, Paul Rotha collection.

¹¹² A good example of a cooking film, is *Daisy Bell Comes to Town*, (1937) directed by J.B.Holmes and produced by Stuart Legg, sponsored by the Gas industry for the National Milk Publicity Council. In this film a pantomime cow brings her milk to town so that a cookery demonstration of a meal using milk, on a gas cooker can take place. At the end we are asked ‘I ask your applause for cow and cooker’.

Housing Problems (1935)¹¹³ begins with a tour of an area of slums in Stepney. The unusual aspect of this film is that in a series of frank interviews to camera the tenants describe the conditions they have to endure. As a reply to their demands for rehousing, a local councillor describes the council's efforts. His description is illustrated with views of scale models of steel-framed blocks of flats, the proposed Quarry Hill estate in Leeds and of Kensal Green house. A highly technical description of the construction of such apartment blocks includes the discussion of the contribution the gas industry has made to these projects. The camera then moves to a new housing estate in Stepney with its pleasant gardens and window boxes, at which point the councillor explains that those who have been re-housed have responded in a positive way to their new surroundings 'keeping them clean and tidy'. Children are seen playing happily, flowers adorn people's flats. There are views of one of the new kitchens with its gas stove and boiler. The film ends by returning to the slums with scenes of grubby children playing in the street, a cat sidling along a wall and a woman beating a dusty rug against a wall. These scenes are accompanied by a woman's voice describing the appalling conditions of the slums.

In many respects *Housing Problems* is no different to the films produced by housing charities. It is aimed at a privileged audience, one that would not have experienced such housing conditions at first hand. Thus the camera transports the audience to the alien land of the slums. This sense of exploration is accentuated by the opening sequence in which the slums are viewed from the sky before the camera

¹¹³ *Housing Problems* (1935), sp: Gas Light and Coke Company, dir/scr: Edgar Anstey, ph: John Taylor, ass: Ruby Grierson, black and white, 17 minutes.

descends to ground level. The technical discussion on the construction of the new housing blocks indicated that this film was aimed at people with influence and power.¹¹⁴ There is a close examination of the slums, views of the decaying walls, floors that slope, bugs, and the slightly comical, but horrifying, story of a woman waking with a rat on her head; as a reviewer remarked the 'rats are discussed, racily'.¹¹⁵ There is also, by present standards, a very patronising description of the 'improving' environment of the new homes into which the former inhabitants of the slums are moved. Councillor Lauder of Stepney Housing Committee who provides much of the commentary, notes that the rehoused slum dwellers' 'interest in their new flats is advancing day by day'.

Some commentators have argued that these elements and the style of the interviews, result in a portrayal of the 'slum-dwellers' as detached and alienating.¹¹⁶ This observation has some merit but it fails to take into consideration the audiences at which this and other inter-war housing films were aimed, ones with prejudices and misconceptions about slum people. The Kensington Housing Trust found that such perceptions made fund-raising difficult and on a wider level could lead to political opposition to slum clearance.

This criticism underestimates the significance of the voiced interviews to camera. In previous films we are 'shown' the housing conditions by the camera, which is in

¹¹⁴ Mike Lewis-Thompson recalls that in the late thirties S.C.Leslie organised a screening of Gas films to which he invited a 'distinguished gathering of architects'. One can be almost certain that *Housing Problems* and *Kensal House* (1936) would have been shown. Lewis-Thompson, On the Record, p. 29.

¹¹⁵ 'Review of Releases', Life and Letters Today, December 1935.

¹¹⁶ Swann, The British Documentary, p. 117.

effect, the representative of the housing charity. The inhabitants are observed and passive. But in *Housing Problems* they are given the opportunity to look straight at the camera and describe in their own words how housing affects them. One young married man even reveals his anger and frustration: 'I only hope the council liven their ideas up and get the flats ready'. These testimonies add to the power of the film especially when the first interviewee tells us that two of his 'youngsters' were lost as a result of the housing conditions. The interviews give the people a degree of respect and dignity rarely found in other housing films of the period. One contemporary reviewer was struck by this innovation:

At first it seems the old stuff-shots of shored-up slums, cat's eye view of roofs, commentary intellectually and emotionally detached whilst dramatically insistent.....But *Housing Problems* is different. Because after we've been looking at the slums - leaking roofs, cracked and bulging walls - the slum-sufferers speak.¹¹⁷

The film-makers recorded the interviews synchronously (a difficult technique at that time) and let the people use their own words unrehearsed. A contradiction of this film, but one that is also a characteristic of the others of this period, is that the inhabitants of the slums, while speaking for themselves, are depicted as powerless 'victims', forced to wait for the local authorities to rehouse them.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Life and Letters Today, December 1935.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

In discussions of this film it is easy to ignore the various direct references to the involvement of the gas industry in the rehousing project and the promotion of gas appliances in the new homes and estates as a whole. The commentary of Councillor Lauder, who represented an 'enlightened public authority', enabled Gas to associate itself with just the kind of progressive Labour Borough it hoped to impress. Secondly, during the discussion of the designs for new public housing in Leeds (Quarry Hill estate) and Kensal Green, gas products are shown to be an integral part of the design:

The kitchen is very important. It must be easy to keep clean and the appliances must be cheap to run. The gas industry has designed suitable appliances for cheap cooking and for room and water heating, specially to meet the needs of slum clearance schemes.

The gas industry's alliance with progressive social reformist documentary film-makers was mutually beneficial. Film-makers such as Arthur Elton, John Taylor and Paul Rotha were financed to make a film they felt to be socially and politically useful, while the gas sponsors gained kudos by association with a modern, progressive and critically-acclaimed style of film-making. In their advertising the gas industry made the most of this link. In November 1937, for example in an advertisement promoting three of their films, (*Children at School*, *The Smoke Menace* and *Kensal House*) against a montage of stills from the films, they announced the industry's slogan 'new social documentary films' were 'now ready' and the page was headed with the quote: from 'the press...Films that will do nothing but good'.¹¹⁹ Despite the benefits of this indirect

¹¹⁹ An advertisement in World Film News, November 1937.

propaganda, or ‘promotion by association’, the company always ensured that their message struck home, and ‘product placements’ are plentiful in their films. As we have seen from the preceding section on RIBA this was not considered unreasonable. The success of the gas strategy is partly indicated by this rather gushing and naive review of *The Londoners*:

The Gas Light and Coke co. which is preparing its own admirable propagandist films, adds each year one, always of a high order, in which it has no financial or business interest at all, performs then a public service which merits full recognition.¹²⁰

Local government film

During the inter-war years a small number of urban local councils produced film propaganda. The earliest surviving film to look at the housing problem is *Glasgow's Housing Problem and Its Solution* (1917-1920) funded by the Glasgow Corporation which was designed to encourage former building workers to return to the trade in order to help with slum clearance. The surviving fragment shows a plan for the Corporation's slum clearance followed by scenes of building workers on the sites of the new houses. Two years later it commissioned Gaumont to produce *Glasgow's Castlemilk and Housing Programme* (1922). Later the Necessitous Children's Holiday Camp Fund produced films in both a dramatic and documentary style to raise funds to send the children of poor families on summer camps.¹²¹ The families depicted in *Sadness and Gladness* (1928),

¹²⁰ The Spectator on *The Londoners* 22 March 1939.

¹²¹ This charity was closely associated with the city's education department, which may have sponsored the films.

Sunny Days (1931) and *Tam Trauchle's Troubles* (1934) live in the Glasgow tenements, but in contrast with English housing films, their problems are portrayed as stemming more from unemployment and poverty than the slums themselves.

Bermondsey Borough Council had one of the most comprehensive film propaganda programmes of the period. In 1923 Labour took control of the council and initiated an impressive programme of municipal socialism which featured a free universal medical service, an anti-TB campaign, a large direct labour policy and a slum clearance campaign. From 1924 the council produced a number of films, mainly to assist its promotion of health and hygiene. However, in 1931 it released a kind of newsreel *Some Activities of the Bermondsey Borough Council*, promoting its work in general, including views of slum clearance work, the construction of public housing using direct labour, and the beautification scheme to turn Bermondsey into a garden suburb. The main reason for this film was to ensure that the local electorate did not take the Labour councillors work for granted. One Councillor told the South London Press in 1935 'We shall consider ourselves repaid if we get the people of Bermondsey to realise what the Council has done for them'.¹²² A related function of the film was to instil in the future electorate of Bermondsey an interest and commitment to municipal welfare. In 1937 Dr Donald Gregg, who was involved in Bermondsey's film propaganda, gave an insight into its role:

¹²² South London Press, Friday September 1935, quoted in E. Lebas, 'When Every Street Became a Cinema. The Film Work of Bermondsey Borough Council's Public Health Department: 1923-1953', History Workshop Journal, 39, (1995), p. 61. In 1938 Preston Borough Council's slum clearance film was also designed to remind the electorate of its debt to the council. After showing the process of a family being moved from a condemned and pest infested slum to a new home near pleasant fields, the film ends with a shot of a councillor (presumably the housing officer) outside the town hall.

A large part of the film deals with Bermondsey's Housing Problem and records some of the pathetic dwellings of its slum streets and courts and shows, more happily, the demolition and rebuilding which is the borough's present task. The younger generation is shown the difficulties of this work in the local scarcity and high cost of building sites, and this film may rouse them to solve in their day of power, these twin obstacles to progress.¹²³

There is also evidence that Labour councils such as Bermondsey regarded film as a means of answering national criticisms of lavish spending.¹²⁴ Such films were also an expression of civic pride, the wish to record important municipal work being similar to naming council housing after politicians.¹²⁵ Local film could be a symbol of modernism as well as civic pride. In Manchester in 1923 a film about the city made by the Amateur Film Society was placed in a tin under the foundation stone of the library, laid by Ramsay Macdonald.¹²⁶

State Involvement

From the mid-1930s until the beginning of the war, there was a growing interest at the Ministry of Health in using film for public health propaganda as opposed to solely medical education.¹²⁷ One official urged that the public relations work of the Ministry

¹²³ Dr. Donald Gregg, 'Bermondsey's Films Discussed', World Film News, November 1937.

¹²⁴ Jackie Henderson, 'Bermondsey Labour Council and the Projection of Health Education Through Film 1920's and 1930's', (MA dissertation, University of Westminster, 1991), pp. 36-38.

¹²⁵ A good example is found in Bermondsey where a block on the Longfield Estate has been named after Britain's first woman, Labour Mayor, Ada Salter.

¹²⁶ Recorded interview with Reg Cordwell (born 1896) who was the Organising Secretary of the Salford Workers Film Society, held in the North West Film Archive.

¹²⁷ PRO MH78/236 Public Relations Co-ordinating Committee, 'Annual Report [on Ministry's public relations activity] 1935-6', 27 August 1936.

could be improved by using film, although it was a new area in which they had little knowledge.¹²⁸ The Treasury was reluctant to provide funds so the Ministry pursued a policy of obtaining propaganda films indirectly by co-operating with companies like the Gas Light and Coke Co. and Pearl Assurance, who, as we have seen, were willing to finance films of 'public interest' by voluntary campaigning organisations such as 'The Health and Cleanliness Council' and the 'British Social Hygiene Council'.¹²⁹ This approach expressed the ambivalence of the Ministry to mass publicity at the time. Government campaigns such as 'A Fitter Britain' and the state - subsidised slum clearance programme required central co-ordinated propaganda, but while funds were provided to enable this indirectly, traditional state antipathy to propaganda inhibited direct involvement.¹³⁰

This indirect propaganda policy created a number of problems. Firstly, independent organisations could not always be relied upon to complete a film project the Ministry had proposed. NALGO, for one, was approached by the Ministry to sponsor a John Grierson film on local government, which eventually fell through.¹³¹ After seeing the Gas film *Enough To Eat* (1936), the Ministry decided to approach the Gas Light and Coke Co. to sponsor a film on a subject such as the services for children.¹³² The Gas Co.

¹²⁸ PRO MH 78/236 Public Relations Co-ordinating Committee, note to Minister by Kenneth McGregor on how public relations work might be improved, 17 August 1936.

¹²⁹ During the 1920s the Ministry funded the Hygiene Council £4-5000 per year to produce films on sexually transmitted diseases. Swann, *British Documentary*, p. 52.

¹³⁰ Mariel Grant, 'The National Health Campaigns of 1937-1938', in D.Fraser (ed.), *Cities, Class and Communication, Essays in Honour of Asa Briggs*, (1990), pp. 216-233.

¹³¹ PRO MH 78/236 Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, meeting of 8 November 1937.

¹³² PRO MH 78/236 Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, meeting of 15 October 1936.

prevaricated over the project, and was eventually lobbied by the Minister himself.¹³³

Once the company agreed to make a film on health, it then could not agree what it should be about.

Secondly, films might deviate from Ministry views. Although in contact with the producers of *Enough To Eat*¹³⁴ the Ministry considered the eventual treatment of the subject to be controversial.¹³⁵ It also had problems controlling the producers of *The March of Time*, who wanted to include the Minister in a film about a fitter Britain, which seemed to be getting ‘out of hand and became a vehicle of one sided controversy’.¹³⁶

The Ministry was more successful in its relationship with Pearl Assurance. In 1937 Pearl sponsored *The Health Of The Nation* and then offered to ‘finance another similar film if the Ministry could produce a suggestion for a scenario at once’. In response a film comparing early nineteenth century conditions with modern health services was suggested.¹³⁷ This idea became *One Hundred Years* (1937) which also included material on housing improvements.

The Great Crusade: The Story of A Million Homes (1936) was the first film with which the Ministry of Health was involved.¹³⁸ Not only did it detail the progress of the

¹³³ PRO MH 78/236 Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, meeting of 27 April 1937.

¹³⁴ PRO MH78/236 Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, meeting of 15 October 1936.

¹³⁵ PRO MH 78/233 Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, meeting of 28 March 1938.

¹³⁶ PRO MH 78/233 Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, meeting of 9 December 1936.

¹³⁷ PRO MH 78/232 Minutes of the Public Relations Committee, meeting of 27 April 1937.

¹³⁸ The film was made by Pathe for the Ministry of Health. The credits do not cite an individual sponsor but thank local authorities and ‘the public spirited men and organisations whose aid made this film

Ministry's Five Year Plan of slum clearance, but it also included a sequence in which the Minister of Health described to camera, the determination of the government to overcome Britain's housing problems. It may be argued that the Ministry's involvement with this film occurred as a response to criticism of Britain's housing presented in the independent film *Housing Problems*.¹³⁹ This is a plausible suggestion since *The Great Crusade* apes the direct interview style of *Housing Problems*. When the slum dwelling family is rehoused in a modern flat on an estate in Wandsworth, they are suitably impressed with the new bath, hot water and light, exclaiming 'It's just like living in a new world'.

The other films with which the Ministry was involved did not discuss housing, although *Health For The Nation* (1939) included a sizeable sequence on the slums that had resulted from the industrial revolution and the legislation that had been passed to tackle them. Documents show that the Ministry of Health fully supported the pictures of slum housing shot by the film-makers, and provided the GPO film unit with the figures for the rate of slum clearance and house-building in the inter-war years.¹⁴⁰

possible'. Rowntree's may have been one of the sponsors as the film includes a section on the 500 homes in York built for the company's employees.

¹³⁹ This has been suggested by both the film historian Rachel Low, *Films of Comment and Persuasion of the 1930's* (1979), p. 159, and John Gold and Stephen Ward in 'Of Plans and Planners, documentary films and the challenge of the urban future, 1935-1952', in D.B. Clarke (ed.) *The Cinematic City*, (1997), p. 65.

¹⁴⁰ PRO INF 5/57, G.C. North (MOH) to S.J. Fletcher (GPO Film Unit), 1 April 1939.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown why and how a number of organisations began to use film propaganda to promote their involvement in the built environment. It has revealed that interest in film was widespread, and in most instances pre-dated the involvement and assistance of the documentary film movement. In fact it reveals that the documentary film movement made only a fraction of the 'housing' films of the period. Although those that it did produce were influential in approach; one result of placing these films in their context has been a reappraisal of *Housing Problems*; it was undoubtedly more radical and influential than recent commentators have claimed.¹⁴¹

The films frequently depicted the slums as a different even exotic world, with the Rag Fair and even the Lambeth Walk market portrayed as unusual. People stare rather sheepishly at the camera and there is no dialogue with the audience, as if they were primitive foreigners. The cameramen's predilection for approaching the slums from the sky reinforces the foreignness of the slums. To the rich benefactors of housing charities the slums were places they did not visit and hardly understood.¹⁴² Writing in 1937, George Orwell recalled that as a boy 'Whole quarters of big towns were considered unsafe [to the upper-classes] because of hooligans....and the London gutter boy', who would terrorise any individual not of their class that strayed from the genteel areas. He felt that this class hostility had largely disappeared and that the inhabitants of such areas

¹⁴¹ Paul Swann, *Documentary*, p. 88; Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing A National Cinema in Britain*, (Oxford, 1995), p. 197. A more measured critique is given by Brian Winston, in *Claiming the Real: the Documentary Film Revisited*, (1995), pp. 43-45, which acknowledges the significance of the interviews for the development of documentary but thinks the political radicalism of the film is only slight.

¹⁴² George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, (1937), references taken from the 1978 penguin edition p. 110.

had been cowed by the Depression into a state of lamentable subservience.¹⁴³ The representation of slum areas and ‘slum-dwellers’ in these films, in particular the propagandists’ attempt to geographically locate such areas for their audiences, shows that to many of the better-off these areas remained out-of-bounds and their inhabitants alien.

This voyeurism was partly, as has been explained, an attempt to add spice and interest to a film, but it also reveals that film-makers, even those such as the documentarists who made *Housing Problems* and who were politically sympathetic to the ‘people’, took a largely ‘anthropological’ interest in the slums. Despite the contained and passive depiction’s of the working-class, there are important instances of attempts to let them speak for themselves. But in the majority of slum clearance schemes carried out during this period there was very little consultation with the people before they were rehoused, and certainly no attempt to discover what sort of house or community they would want to move to. As one historian of slum clearance in Sunderland has explained, it was assumed by local authorities that people would want to leave the old areas, and they felt justified in compelling them to move on the grounds of children’s welfare and the need to safeguard public health.¹⁴⁴ Thus until the political and social context changed, in particular the way social housing was administered, such a patronising ‘charitable’ approach was inevitable.

¹⁴³ Orwell, *Wigan Pier*, p. 111.

¹⁴⁴ Norman Dennis, *People and Planning*, (1970). P. 156.

All the films have a structure which begins with scenes of the slums and is resolved with a 'happy ending' of the people being re-housed. Some, such as *Silver Lining* and *Houses in Lambeth* (which contained a semi-dramatised sequence), dramatised this story. These narratives demonstrate that re-housing was considered to bring more than physical and practical benefits, with the family often reunited and scenes of contented domesticity pervade. For example in *Contrasts* a re-housed family sit together in the parlour, mother sewing, father smoking his pipe and reading, the children quietly playing at their parents' feet. In particular the benefits that re-housing brings to children and their welfare was stressed. Mothers are seen washing the children in the bath, dressing them in clean clothes and feeding them at table. The children themselves seem to behave in a more ordered and less unruly fashion than before, they are better groomed and better dressed. This emphasis on child welfare reflects the priorities of those responsible for slum clearance projects.¹⁴⁵ Men, who are generally absent from the slum scenes or when they appear seem rather aimless, [with the exception of *Housing Problems*] do appear in the re-housing sections, they have workshops, they are seen tending allotments or walking with their wives. There is an implicit message that removal from the slums not only improved people's lives but contributed to social order.

These happy endings frequently included expressions of gratitude by the new tenants. In *Housing Problems* Mrs Reddington says how pleased she is with her new flat and that the 'children are ever so much healthier and better'. In *Sadness and Gladness*

¹⁴⁵ Dennis, *People and Planning*, (1970), p.156.

(1928), the parents are shown writing to the charity to thank them for taking their children on holiday. Follow-up studies found that although a minority did object to being moved out of their old homes, most people preferred the new ones.¹⁴⁶ Many members of 1997 audiences, who think access to decent housing should be a right, find such scenes uncomfortable and patronising. However, the scenes are consistent with the purpose of the films as charity fund-raisers or to encourage municipal slum clearance. Secondly, the films were made during a period in which the state was only beginning to provide decent working-class housing and there was still a widespread belief that such work should be left to the voluntary sector and the market. Moreover, a key element was the strong link drawn between poor housing conditions and bad health, an association which had yet to be universally accepted.¹⁴⁷ The next chapter explores the political and historical context of the production of films for a much wider audience on the reconstruction of the built environment during the Second World War.

¹⁴⁶ Dennis, People and planning, (1970), p. 152. This did not mean to say that people's lives were improved. Higher rents that tended to go with the new flats could undermine the household economy of a family that had a precarious income. Moreover, if the new home was located in a new district the costs of transport for work and the higher prices of local food could actually lead to greater impoverishment. The trustees of the KHT were well aware that the slum-dwellers of Notting Dale benefited from living close to the neighbouring wealthier districts where women could easily obtain work as a char lady or girls a position in domestic service.

¹⁴⁷ J.Gold and S.Ward, Of Plans and Planners, p. 64.

Chapter Two: The Production of Government Sponsored Films.

By the end of the 1930s the government had shown that it was beginning to take an interest in the national planning of the built environment, exemplified by the 1937 Barlow Commission on the location of industry. The war undoubtedly accelerated the development of government policy and for a time there appeared to be a political consensus to tackle the problems of Britain's built environment with a new vigour. The damage caused by the blitz helped to focus minds in and outside Parliament. Moreover, as it was frequently pointed out in films such as *New Towns For Old* and *Proud City*, in some urban areas the devastation caused by the blitz actually simplified reconstruction on more rational planned lines.

Lobby groups such as the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA), the Housing Centre and the 1940 Council found the government much more receptive to their ideas. This was reflected, in February 1941, by the appointment of Frederic Osborn, President of the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA), to Reith's Consultative Committee on Reconstruction.

Outside the government, interest in Britain's physical reconstruction was widespread. Since the beginning of the war the architectural press had been arguing for the government to embark on planning the widescale reconstruction of Britain's built environment, and by 1941 this had been taken up by the popular press. This seemed to

echo a genuine public interest as many thousands attended travelling exhibitions on Britain's reconstruction organised by groups such as the 1940 Council and the TCPA.¹

The wartime evolution of policy, leading to the new Ministry of Town and Country Planning in February 1943 and the Town Planning Acts of 1944 and 1947, was not smooth and encountered much opposition. Until December 1942 and the release of the Beveridge Report, Churchill gave a low priority to post-war policy, vetoing any declaration of war aims. He wanted to focus all energies on the military task and was also unwilling to commit a post-war government to policies it might not be able to fulfil. Moreover, he was worried that discussion of controversial domestic issues would threaten the coalition. However, the appointment of Lord Reith as the Minister of Works and Buildings in October 1940 marked a partial acceptance by Churchill that some overtures had to be made in this direction. The new minister quickly gave a fillip to the development of reconstruction plans, by setting up the Uthwatt Committee on land values, appointing a Consultative Committee of Experts on Reconstruction and supporting the recommendations of the Barlow Commission, notably endorsing the idea of a central planning authority.

In February 1942, following Reith's parliamentary announcement that such an authority was to be established, Churchill removed the Minister from his position, as he disliked such an open commitment to radical change. At the cabinet committee stage of Reith's draft bill of the Town and Country Planning Act there were further signs of

¹ It was estimated that 10,000 people visited the 'Living in cities Exhibition', held in West Ham from 26 May to 6 June 1942. Barking and East Ham Express, 5 June 1942.

retreat from an earlier commitment to radical reform, as discussions over the proposed central planning authority came up against conservative reaction. After Reith's departure the Consultative Panel of Experts on reconstruction was virtually ignored. The eventual planning legislation of November 1944 proved disappointing to those optimistic for radical change, as conservatives had emasculated the original commitments in the bill to Uthwatt's recommendations. In particular local authorities that had been encouraged 'to plan boldly' now found that the act heavily constrained such plans because of its limiting financial conditions, notably by setting unrealistically low limits on central government financial assistance for reconstruction schemes and setting compensation rates for land purchase at too high a level.² A further disappointment for some planning lobbyists, such as the TCPA, was the absence of provision for New Towns in the wartime legislation.

Increased activity and interest on the built environment resulted in many films on the subject. Between 1940 and 1946 thirty two documentaries, seven government sponsored newsreels and thirty-four commercial newsreels (made by Movietone, Paramount, Pathe News and Gaumont British) were produced on housing, planning and related issues, while a further nine documentaries referred to housing, and a clutch of feature films such as *The Lion Has Wings* (1939) and *Millions Like Us* (1943) also touched on these subjects.

Films on the built environment assumed a greater importance in wartime. In the beginning, screenings were still being arranged by pressure groups such as the 1940

² Junichi Hasegawa, Replanning the Blitzed City Centre, (Buckingham, 1992), pp. 14-15.

Council or the TCPA, and shown to relatively small audiences of professionals and interested individuals. These shows differed little from those that had been run in the 1920s and 1930s to publicise housing reform and raise money for housing associations. By 1945 they had moved into the mainstream of political life and were held at prestigious venues with large audiences. At the 'Coventry of the Future' exhibition in October 1945, the exhibition cinema ran three film shows a day to a packed house. The total attendance figure for the film shows was 25,000.³ There was also a marked difference between the films shown at the beginning of the war, which tended to be more general, and those available by 1945. For example, the films shown at Coventry were relevant and contemporary titles, including the premiere of *A City Reborn*, about the reconstruction of the city.⁴

Some of these wartime films were sponsored independently by organisations such as the Housing Centre or sympathetic private companies like Cadbury's, but the majority of new films on the built environment were financed by the state, (twenty two of the thirty one documentaries produced between 1940 and 1946). Films looked at the subject in a variety of ways, focusing on architecture, planning, and the process of erecting a pre-fabricated house.⁵

³ The exhibition ran from 8-20 October 1945. *Camera Principis* (Journal of Coventry Nalgo), September 1945, p. 3.

⁴ The film programme for the first week was as follows: Afternoon show, *When We Build Again*, *A City Reborn*; Evening performance, *New Towns For Old*, *The First Temporary House*, *Rebuilding Bermondsey* [probably an issue of the factory newsreel *Worker and Warfront*], *Reshaping the Landscape*. The programme for the second week was: Afternoon performance, *Rebuilding Bermondsey*, *Housing in Scotland*, *Reshaping the Landscape*; *The First Temporary House*, *A City Reborn*. Evening performance: *When We Build Again* and *A City Reborn*. Details in PRO HLG 79/127 Coventry of the Future Exhibition.

⁵ This study will concentrate on those films directed at the public rather than specialist films for builders.

The Architects' Journal (AJ) argued that the ideas of architecture and planning should be made more accessible to the ordinary man⁶. It praised books like J.M.Richards Modern Architecture (1940) which popularised architecture and planning and argued that film had a similar role. The AJ urged that films on reconstruction should be shown at exhibitions, so that as many people as possible could understand the issues, and at conferences to help the practitioners of planning 'grasp the wider aspects of the problem'⁷. Thus, it encouraged RIBA, the Ministry of Information⁸, and the new Ministry of Town and Country Planning⁹ to produce film propaganda on reconstruction. In the absence of a suitable English film on the subject, the AJ recommended an American production *The City* (1938) with a commentary by Lewis Mumford:¹⁰

This film shows many town-planning problems clearly. But excellent though it is, we feel that it should be followed by a similar British film. The more familiar the sights and sounds are in such a film, the more it will bring home to the people - a traffic jam of Austin's and Morris's on the Portsmouth road means more to the English....than the congestion of roadsters with their gum-chewing and weary occupants on a dried up USA highway; and the slums of Liverpool than the slums of Detroit.¹¹

Until the release of *When We Build Again* in February 1943, it was *The City* plus other American productions on pre-fabricated housing such as *A City Rises Overnight* (1942) and *A City Comes To Alexander Corner*, which were screened at film shows

⁶ The Architects' Journal, (AJ) 24 October 1940.

⁷ AJ, 9 December 1943.

⁸ AJ, 12 June 1941.

⁹ AJ, 11 March 1943.

¹⁰ *The City* was produced by Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke under the guidelines of the American Institute of Planners. The production was financed by the Carnegie Corporation to the tune of \$50,000.

¹¹ AJ, 12 June 1941.

organised by AASTA, RIBA, Housing Centre and the Architectural Association. Most of the English films shown were pre-war productions such as *Housing Problems* (1935), *Housing Progress* (1937) and *The Face Of Britain* (1934). After 1943 however, the screening of *When We Build Again* became popular at film shows on reconstruction and at the travelling exhibition of the same name, organised by the TCPA.¹²

The Town and Country Planning Journal also complained about the lack of films on planning in the early years of the war. In the autumn 1941 edition an article by the documentary director, Paul Rotha, demanded that relevant government departments and the construction industry should sponsor films on urban planning.¹³ The Journal also welcomed the release of *When We Build Again*, stating that apart from American films like *The City* and *The River*, the only ones available to those ‘groups clamouring for film about housing and planning’ had been ‘facile pre-war’ titles on ‘housing problems’ and ‘dreary beautiful Britain’s’¹⁴.

Documentary film-makers both in and outside the Grierson school were particularly interested in promoting urban reconstruction through film. It has been argued that this subject was ideally suited to the movement's social reformist ideology and methods.¹⁵ Jill Craigie, who directed *The Way We Live* (1946) about the reconstruction of Plymouth, recalled that housing and town planning were issues of special interest to

¹² AJ, 4 November 1943.

¹³ Town and Country Planning, 35 (1941), p. 88.

¹⁴ Town and Country Planning, 42 (1943), p. 72.

¹⁵ John Gold and Stephen Ward, ‘We're going to do it right this time: cinematic representations of urban planning and the British new towns, 1939-51’ in S.C. Aitken and L.Zonn (eds), Place, Power, Situation and Spectacle: a Geography of Film, (1994) p. 6.

herself and other film-makers of her type.¹⁶ Moreover, many war-time film-makers already had experience of working on this topic: Arthur Elton and Edgar Anstey had directed *Housing Problems* (1935) and Paul Rotha had conducted research for a more ambitious film project on the same subject. Rotha now argued that the time was ripe for more films on these issues:

With its many unique devices of animated models, diagrams and map work, with its power for argument and discussion in the soundtrack, with its simple yet persuasive powers of explanation, and with its capacity for wide and simultaneous performances in dozens of places, the film is the most suitable medium for this education to a new acceptance and viewpoint towards living.¹⁷

Rotha was undoubtedly on a mission to produce films on reconstruction. He was worried that if the opportunity for creating a more progressive Britain was not grasped, reactionaries within British society (for Rotha the worst examples existed at the British Council) would ensure a return not just to the status quo before the war, but possibly construct a fascist state. As he saw it, after the war there would ‘be the most fearful struggle to revert to the old social system’, therefore propagandists such as himself had to be ready to use their influence for the ‘social good’.¹⁸ But in order for a wide-ranging programme of social reform and reconstruction to ‘take root and flourish’ it was vital that films were produced to prepare and educate the people.¹⁹

In October 1940 Rotha saw that the war presented a unique political opportunity to formulate plans for building a ‘progressive’ world. His strategy was to assemble a

¹⁶ In conversation with Toby Haggith, Summer 1992.

¹⁷ Paul Rotha, ‘Films For Planning’, *Town and County Planning*, 35 (1941).

¹⁸ Paul Rotha diary, 19 February 1942, p. 20, Book 2, Folder 16, Box 23, Rotha collection, 2001, University Research Library, UCLA.

¹⁹ Ibid.

group of like-minded specialists in the 'social environment', such as nutrition, medicine, agriculture, sociology, and architecture, and bring them into contact with public relations experts. The group's task would be to formulate plans for better living and then publicise them through 'press, film and radio' to persuade the people that their lives would be greatly improved by bringing these plans into being. If such a significant body of public opinion could be created Rotha was sure that 'nothing would stop the people getting them.'²⁰ Many of these ideas were formed during the blitz, when he was helping the Christian Socialist Father Grosser with his work in an East End bomb shelter, and one can appreciate his sense of urgency.

One of the most important pressure groups at the time was the 1940 Council which became instrumental in persuading government and commercial bodies to sponsor films on the built environment. This ad-hoc body was formed in February 1940, out of a conference at the RIBA, and had three objectives: first, to promote research into the planning of a 'social environment'; second, to publicise the findings of this research and the need for planning and third, to ensure that this planning took place.²¹ To this end the Council prepared the travelling exhibitions 'Plan Scotland Now' and 'Living in the Cities', made possible by a grant from the Carnegie Trust. Membership of the 1940 Council was made up of important figures from a variety of fields, some of whom had an interest in film. The chairman, Lord Balfour of Burleigh as the President of the Kensington Housing Trust and Vice-chair of the Housing Centre, was well aware of the value of film. He had spoken at Kensington Housing Trust meetings at which film was

²⁰ Paul Rotha diary, 8 October 1940, Book 1, Folder 16, Box 23, Rotha collection.

²¹ PRO HLG 86/1 Memo on the 1940 Council, 18 October 1940.

shown and had appeared in Nathan's film *Housing Societies* (1939). The Council's secretary, Judith Ledeboer, had been a member of the RIBA Film Sub-Committee set up to steer the Gas/RIBA film.²² Not surprisingly, by early October 1940 a planning script was being written for the Council by the town planner, Thomas Sharp.

Paul Rotha was soon involved with the organisation, and he encouraged the membership to widen its circle to include people with public relations skills.²³ In April 1941 the 1940 Council established a Films Sub-Committee to co-ordinate the production of films on reconstruction. Under the chairmanship of Dr. Julian Huxley, the committee included Paul Rotha and representatives from RIBA, Political and Economic Planning, Film Centre, and the Ministry of Information.²⁴ In order to 'inspire' the Committee, Rotha screened his own film *The Face of Britain* (1934) and Mumford's *The City* (1939) the latter 'a great stimulator'.²⁵ Rotha was excited about the possibilities of this organisation, describing it to John Grierson as the 'most important pressure pad we have invented'.²⁶

At government departments concerned with the built environment there was interest in using film. Under Lord Reith, the Ministry of Works and Building was

²² Other prominent members included Montague Barlow and Patrick Abercrombie who were both members of the Royal Commission on the Distribution of Industrial Population, Frederic Osborne of the TCPA, Max Lock and A. Rowse.

²³ Rotha suggested the science journalist Arthur Calder-Marshall and Francis Williams, who was the editor of the *Daily Herald*, 1936-40, and Controller of Press and Censorship, MOI from 1941. After the war Williams was Prime Minister Clement Attlee's public relations advisor and a prominent member of the Home Information Services (official) Committee, which guided post-war government publicity.

²⁴ Known members: David Owen (PEP), E.J. Carter (Library RIBA), Basil Ward (ex-RIBA, Ministry of Home Security), Francis Williams (IAE), Ritchie Calder, Easterbrook (Ministry of Agriculture), Basil Wright (Film Centre).

²⁵ Paul Rotha to Richard Griffith, 6 April 1941, p. iv, Folder 5, Box 70, Rotha collection.

²⁶ Rotha to John Grierson, Whit Monday 1941, Folder 7, Box 67, Rotha collection.

particularly keen on planning the radical reconstruction of Britain. Reith encouraged local authorities which had suffered badly in the blitz 'to plan boldly', even hinting that finance should not be seen as a constraint²⁷. He was also keen that these ideas should be well publicised. At a press conference held at the Ministry of Works and Building in 1941 Reith encouraged the press to give more coverage to post-war planning: 'We think it is not subversive of the war effort, it is right that there should be post-war planning and that people should know there is something to which we should look forward'.²⁸

Lord Reith contacted Rotha not long after taking over to arrange a meeting.²⁹ In May 1941 Rotha screened *The City* to Reith, who was so impressed that he persuaded the MOI to prepare a two-reel version with a new commentary for English non-theatrical distribution.³⁰ Reith then asked his press officer, Harold Lewis, to ask Rotha to prepare a 'confidential memorandum' on how films could 'be used for Reconstruction Propaganda.'³¹ On completion of this, Rotha congratulated himself that he had done 'every conceivable thing to get planning films made'.³²

Other people at the Ministry were equally keen on film, notably Thomas Sharp, who had written the planning film script for the 1940 Council and Gilbert McAllister, the publicist and secretary of the Town and Country Planning Association, who joined in

²⁷ Nick Tiratsoo, 'The Reconstruction of Britain's Blitzed Cities', in J.Hasegawa (ed.), Anglo-Japanese Reconstruction 1945-51, (Tokyo, forthcoming) p. 6.

²⁸ PRO HLG 71/1254 Transcript of Reith's speech, April 1941.

²⁹ Paul Rotha diary, 11 October 1940, Book 1, Folder 16, Box 23, Paul Rotha collection, 2001, UCLA.

³⁰ *The City* was acquired by the MOI from the Museum of Modern Art in New York and included in the Central Film Library's catalogue for non-theatrical distribution in September 1942.

³¹ Paul Rotha diary, 7 May 1941, p. 56, Book 1, Folder 16, Box 23, Rotha collection.

³² Ibid.

August 1941.³³ Just before he did so Paul Rotha gave him a copy of the memo he had prepared for Reith. Rotha had high hopes that such positive developments at Reith's ministry would lead to the production of reconstruction films. However, he was concerned that it could be difficult to get Treasury money for such projects. McAllister was himself exploring the possibilities of securing private finance for a planning film for commercial distribution.³⁴

Meetings with the 1940 Council Film Committee gave further indications of the Ministry's commitment to exploring 'the reconstruction field with film'.³⁵ In 1941/42 public relations officers advised film-makers working on projects about the built environment, such as *Builders* (1942) and *New Towns For Old* (1942).³⁶ But they wanted to move from an advisory role in film production to producing their own films and other publicity on 'physical reconstruction'.³⁷ In the end the films produced by the Ministry were of the instructional rather than propaganda type, such as *How to Erect the American Pre-fabricated House* (1946) and *Shaping the Future* (1946), a recruiting film for the building industry aimed at schoolboys. The sponsoring of propaganda films on planning issues passed over to the new Ministry of Town and Country Planning (MOTCP).

³³ Gilbert McAllister had worked in publicity at New Zealand House, Federal Union and then the Ministry of Food before moving to the Ministry of Works and Buildings.

³⁴ Paul Rotha diary, 18 August 1941, p. 75, Book 1, Folder 16, Box 23, Rotha collection.

³⁵ Rotha to John Grierson, Whit Monday 1941, Folder 7, Box 67, Rotha collection.

³⁶ The following films were produced by the MOI in association with the Ministry of Works and Buildings: *Builders* (1942), *New Towns For Old* (1942), *Worker and Warfront No: 13* (item on Frame Concrete Housing), *New Builders* (1944), *Bomb Repair Speed-Up* (1945), a trailer and *Short-term Housing* (1945).

³⁷ PRO HLG 71/1253 Letter E.J.Bamford (MOI) to H.G. Vincent (Min. of Works and Building), 27 August 1941.

Rotha's diary gives the impression that he was the key actor in all this work towards producing reconstruction films. He was an important film propagandist and someone who helped to stimulate action, but, as has been indicated, there already existed a lot of interest in film among individuals and organisations involved in planning the reconstruction of British towns and cities.

Official Film Production

The MOTCP or another relevant government Ministry might sponsor a film on the built environment, but the job of supervising production and distribution was undertaken by the films' sections of the MOI or British Council.³⁸ The Films Division of the MOI which was responsible for the bulk of all state-funded films for the public (624 films), also produced the majority of films on the built environment (eleven) with the British Council's Film Department producing three.

MOI film commissions were shared out between its own production unit, Crown Film (formerly the GPO Film Unit) and a large number of independent companies. In the case of films which included references to or concentrated on the built environment, the main films were all made by independent companies, namely, Strand, Paul Rotha Productions, Charter Films, Green Park and Gryphon.³⁹ The MOI would then organise finance with the Treasury, keep an eye on the film throughout production and liaise with any government departments whose interests related to the film.

³⁸ With the exception of *Town and Country Planning* (1946), an ABCA film, produced by the War Office.

³⁹ Only three Crown films *Health in War*, *Words For Battle* and *Builders* touched on the subject, see chapter 3.

For political and other reasons discussed below, the first film which included discussion of post-war reconstruction of the built environment (*Five and Under*) was not released until June 1941, although discussion by people outside government, notably in the 1940 Council were looking at producing a planning film as early as October 1940. But it was not until the end of May 1941 that both Lord Reith's Ministry and the MOI began to explore the production of reconstruction films with the 1940 Council Film Committee. *New Towns For Old*, the first MOI film to be dedicated to the reconstruction of the built environment was not released until July 1942.

Film-minded individuals in government such as Gilbert McAllister and Thomas Sharp who had private connections with planning groups such as the TCPA, RIBA and, most importantly, the 1940 Council, presented the case for films on the built environment particularly strongly. Although, few production papers of relevant films have survived, one can guess that *New Towns for Old* arose from discussions among those connected with the 1940 Council Film Committee. It is likely that *Proud City* (1945) about the County of London Plan also began life in this way, as the author of its first treatment and principal adviser to Green Park Productions, was E.J.Carter, RIBA librarian and member of the 1940 Council Film Committee. This Committee may also have suggested the two and later four reel unrealised 'Theory of Planning' project, the purpose of which was to 'illustrate the basic principles of planning Anytown...based on one Town, but not recognised so. Good and bad examples ... were to be used with large scale models of new plans.'⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Memo from Miss Helen de Mouilpied, Films Division MOI, to Regional Information and Film Officers, on 'film production plans', 23 November 1944, p. 2. Helen Forman (née de Mouilpied) Papers.

In the early part of the war senior MOI and Film Division staff conceived many of the ideas for films and there was little involvement from other ministries. *A City Reborn* (1945) about the reconstruction plans for Coventry, began as a suggestion from Montague Slater during a Film Production Conference in December 1942. Slater's idea for a film 'designed to create hope for the future and confidence in our post-war planning powers', arose out of a talk at the conference by an MOI intelligence officer Dr. Stephen Taylor, who predicted the state of the nation and the people's perceptions over the next six months.⁴¹ He predicted that physical and nervous tiredness due to the strain of war work and also, for some, civil defence, would increase and effect a larger section of the population. Partly as a consequence he 'expected the general public to become more and more interested in post-war planning'.⁴² This episode is illustrative of two important aspects of MOI Film Production. Firstly, that government film agencies, and the MOI in particular, increasingly used social surveying techniques and human intelligence reports from personnel employed, such as Dr. Taylor, and obtained from independent sources such as Mass Observation, when preparing propaganda.⁴³ Secondly, as with all propaganda, but especially film, it was necessary to anticipate the popular mood and political events many months ahead as film production could be protracted. In the Summer of 1944, Films Division Officers proposed several films on post-war planning, including housing and planning, which anticipated future needs: 'We should not wait until the war cabinet or government departments individually issue specific plans on

⁴¹ Minutes of MOI Films Division Production Conference, 30 December 1942, Forman Papers.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Dr. Stephen Taylor was the Director of the Home Intelligence Division at the MOI.

housing or agriculture for example, before putting films on this subject into production.’⁴⁴

By the summer of 1944 the initiative for many films already in production came from other Ministries. By 1943, Helen Forman (who worked in MOI distribution) reckoned that ‘50% of Films Division's budget was spent in close collaboration with other ministries’.⁴⁵ Films requested by other government departments were sometimes individual projects, but more often they formed part of a wider campaign conducted by the MOI, and were produced in conjunction with leaflets, poster displays, broadcasts etc. For example *Shaping The Future* (1946), which was made to encourage men in the services and war production to take up a building career to help with reconstruction, would have been part of a wider campaign employing newspaper adverts, talks and posters. Other films made for specific Ministries include *Bomb Repair Speed-Up* (1945) for the Ministry of Works, *Housing in Scotland* (1945) for the Department of Health for Scotland, and *Houses in History* (1946) for the Ministry of Education.

Ideas also came from the film-makers themselves. However, there was no guarantee that these ideas would be accepted. It was difficult for a film-maker to get a project supported by the MOI unless a government department could be interested in the subject. Paul Rotha and Otto Neurath had to lobby the MOI to make a film on the

⁴⁴ ‘Post-war Planning, Film Plan, Part 5’, 20 June 1944, Forman Papers.

⁴⁵ Letter from Helen Forman to Nicholas Pronay, 18 January 1981, in the Imperial War Museum (IWM) Film and Video Archive.

prevention of TB, by getting a contact at the National Association for the Prevention of TB to suggest it to the Ministry of Health.⁴⁶

Distribution of MOI films was achieved in two ways. First, during a five minute slot (later extended to fifteen) in every cinema programme and second, through the government's own non-theatrical network, whereby 16mm prints were shown for free in factories, village halls on building sites and elsewhere. It was estimated that from 1942-3, there were four million regular viewers on the non-theatrical circuit, although this was a fraction of commercial audiences.⁴⁷

Films for the non-theatrical circuit were held at the Central Film Library and could be ordered directly for free in addition to being distributed around the country via the MOI's film vans. By 1945 the MOI was issuing lists of sound films on related subjects from which programmes of eighty to ninety minutes would be shown by MOI 'mobile' projectionists. 'Plans For Living' was a list of seven films on the topic of 'Housing and Town and Country Planning' which included the commercially-sponsored film *When We Build Again* (1942) and the American film *Valley Of the Tennessee* (1944), as well as British official films.⁴⁸

The succession of military defeats experienced by the British in 1940 made it clear that the war was likely to be protracted. As a result MOI officials who had given a

⁴⁶ Letter from Paul Rotha to Otto Neurath, 17 September 1941, Otto and Marie Neurath Archive, Department of Graphic Design, Reading University.

⁴⁷ Swann, *British Documentary*, p. 169.

⁴⁸ The government British films were *A City Reborn* (1944), *Proud City* (1945), *The Plan and the People* (1945), *Housing in Scotland* (1944).

priority to the role of film abroad now began to consider more carefully the propaganda needs of the home front. In 1939 one official had argued that the Films Division of the MOI should be run as the servant of the Foreign Publicity Division.⁴⁹ Now officials planned how film and other publicity media could be used to transmit relatively complex propaganda ideas able to sustain support for the state in a possibly long and bloody war. Among these were concepts such as common suffering, a shared access to democratic rights and, significantly for this study, the reconstruction of Britain (including the built environment) on socially progressive planned lines.⁵⁰ This interest in ‘peace-aims’ was not merely pragmatic as many officials believed that it was right to educate the people about the issues at stake. Lord Davidson, the MOI’s Commercial Relations adviser, in a paper for MOI’s Policy Committee, suggested that peace-aims should be discussed, not to develop policy, but to encourage public debate so that the right legislation could be enacted after the war.⁵¹

Once the war had started, a bullish view of Britain's social problems, among them housing, became an important aspect of propaganda abroad. In the early years of the war senior officials at the MOI expressed concern at the quality of German film propaganda and its success at gaining distribution abroad, particularly in neutral countries.⁵² Moreover, it was felt that German propaganda went largely unchallenged, as British film efforts were hampered by lack of co-ordination and a shortage of funds.⁵³ German

⁴⁹ PRO INF 1/196 Un-dated memo by Charles Peake on the problems of Films Division, 1939. Peake was the Head of the News Department of the Foreign Office and Chief Press Adviser to the MOI.

⁵⁰ PRO INF 1/848 Minutes of the Policy Committee, meeting of 22 May 1940.

⁵¹ PRO INF 1/849 MOI Policy Committee, paper by Lord Davidson 31 October 1940. Viscount John Campbell Davidson was Unionist MP for Hemel Hempstead (1920-23 & 1924-37); President of the Board of Trade 1921-2; Chairman of the Unionist Party 1927-30; Hon. Adviser Commercial Relations MOI 1940; and then Controller of Production from 1941.

⁵² PRO INF 1/196 Memo by Charles Peake on the problems of the Films Division, 1939.

⁵³ PRO INF 1/196 Memo by Charles Peake.

propaganda aimed at presenting Britain as an imperialist and class-bound nation where the working-class were down-trodden and in poor health.⁵⁴ Thus, MOI officials were anxious to counteract German propaganda abroad particularly in the USA, where there was evidence that there already existed a good deal of anti-British feeling. These feelings were encapsulated in letters sent from the USA to England during a three month period in 1942, and intercepted by postal and telegraph censors. This anonymous letter from Brooklyn to Stoke-on-Trent was one of the fiercest:

When the United Nations finally win, I guess
the logical and practical thing to do is to
take over England lock, stock and barrel. Only
then will we have real peace. I don't give a
hang who takes you over, either us or
Russia...English Imperialism is
responsible for more of our grief and
wars....than you can shake a stick at.
Incidentally, I'm surprised to find that a
great many Aussies hate the set-up in England
more than I do!⁵⁵

Among the many references to the English class-system, one writer who had compiled a list of twenty-three reasons for the unpopularity of the British, explained:

9. U.S. Foreign language groups tend to think
of the British as belonging to the class of
wicked landlord nations whose victims fled to
the U.S. in search of liberty.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ PRO LAB 6/123 Memo Lindsey (MOI) to S.R.Chaloner (Ministry of Labour), 15 December 1939. This refers to German broadcasts that said: 'British masses are being forced to fight for the sole interests of Jews, Capitalists, profiteers, interested financiers, landlords and the upper-classes generally, by whom they are exploited and down-trodden both in peace and war'.

⁵⁵ PRO CO 875/18/11 Publicity about the Colonies in America 1942-3, Postal and Telegraph Censorship Report on the United States of America No.1, 11 September 1942, 'An examination of the many reasons for the unfriendly feelings of a large number of Americans towards GB', Letter from Bronx, New York to Stoke-on-Trent, LIV/48572/42, 17 July 1942.

⁵⁶ PRO CO 875/18/11 Postal and telegraph censorship report on the United States of America No.1, 11 September 1942, quote taken from a list of reasons for the 'unpopularity of the British', sent between June and August 1942.

To counter such views, Professor A.G.Highet of the MOI, and his wife⁵⁷, writing from America, suggested that film propaganda must stress the positive aspects of life in Britain. The need they reported was for ‘films demonstrating the beauties of Britain, or British achievements in slum clearance and public education’.⁵⁸

Unlike the MOI, the British Council was primarily concerned with film as overseas propaganda. But during the war about thirty of its films were distributed in Britain. In fact, the BC considered that the ‘acid test of the merits of theatrical short films’ was their ability to compete with commercially distributed films.⁵⁹ The Council's pre-war film catalogue presented the most laudatory and conservative view of Britain. Its stated role was to produce films which:

present Britain on a long-term basis, i.e., not merely to show the life of Britain as it has been superficially altered by the impact of war, but rather to show the fundamental qualities of the nation and the traditional heritage of the people,...⁶⁰

However, during the war the BC's Film Department came under pressure to change this policy and produce films that addressed more contemporary issues. When Paul Rotha showed a typical group of BC films to the 1940 Council Film Committee they were ‘unfavourably received’.⁶¹ As a result of the screening, one member of the

⁵⁷ Arthur Gilbert Highet, Assistant Controller 1927-37 then Controller from 1937 of the GPO Publicity Department. During the war he was a public relations officer with the GPO and was also employed by the MOI in its Films Division, based in New York with the British Mission (1941-46).

⁵⁸ PRO INF 1/848 Memorandum on British Counter Propaganda, Professor and Mrs A.G.Highet, 26 March 1940.

⁵⁹ British Council Survey, *The Wartime Trading Bulletin*, Vol V, pt II, July-December 1943, p. 1910.

⁶⁰ British Council Survey, *The Wartime Trading Bulletin*, Vol V, pt II, July-December 1943, p. 1910.

⁶¹ The film screening took place on the 19 June 1941, and was composed of the following BC titles: *Architects of England*, *Learning To Live*, *The Green Girdle* and *Queen Cotton*. Paul Rotha diary, 23 June 1941, Book 1, Folder 16, Box 23, Paul Rotha Collection.

committee, Vernon Bartlett M.P.⁶², promised to lobby the Council's new Chairman, Sir Malcolm Robertson, who was regarded as an old Tory, but possibly open to persuasion.⁶³

The MOI in particular argued that the Council films were creating a bad impression abroad and tending to reinforce enemy propaganda. The Minister of Information, Brendan Bracken, claimed that they failed to show Britain's adaptation to war, presenting British society as frivolous and over concerned with the preservation of the status quo:

The Germans make a great propaganda point that they are introducing a new and better way of living. The British Council films are in direct contrast and imply throughout that the old ways of life are good enough for us.⁶⁴

There was acknowledgement within the Council that MOI criticisms had some validity.⁶⁵ As a result a number of films were made 'on public utilities and services'.⁶⁶ In committee discussions about new productions, it was felt that one of the principles of film production must be to give a good impression to foreigners; 'really important films' needed to be made 'which can show the world something better than they have'. Specifically these were to show that Britain was improving the conditions of the poor by providing various services and amenities and tackling problems of housing and unemployment. It was also suggested that a film on town planning should be made.⁶⁷

⁶² Vernon Bartlett was a journalist and broadcaster on foreign affairs, he was on the staff of the Mail, The Times, and then the News Chronicle from 1934-54. He was an Independent Progressive MP for Bridgewater in Somerset, 1938-50.

⁶³ Paul Rotha diary, 23 June 1941, Book 1, Folder 16, Box 23, Paul Rotha collection.

⁶⁴ PRO BW 4/64 Memo from Brendan Bracken (MOI) to the B.C. Chairman Malcolm Robertson, 21 December 1941.

⁶⁵ PRO BW 4/64 Memo from Primrose, (secretary of the BC Film Department) to Neville Kearney (Director of BC Film Dept.) and Philip Guedalla, Film Department, 13 December 1941.

⁶⁶ Wartime Trading Bulletin, p. 1910.

⁶⁷ PRO BW 4/17 Memo to Primrose, 10 November 1941.

Later, Oliver Bell of the BFI and A.G. Highet suggested, in a memo prepared for the Film Committee, that a film should also be made about ‘Garden Cities’:

in relation to co-operative community housing. This somewhat dull title covers a film which would show one aspect of our experimental attempts to house a highly industrialised population and to prevent the squalid areas so well known in all industrial centres throughout the world. It should therefore contain material of interest to all workers and sociologists.⁶⁸

An indication of this change was the BC’s approaches to the 1940 Council in March 1941, for help with a committee on reconstruction films. For reasons that are not clear, the BC film officers, Philip Guedalla and Neville Kearney, initially rejected the invitation to join the new 1940 Council Film Committee. In a mood of suspicion and pique, they even refused to screen the BC films *The Green Girdle* (1941) and *Architects of England* (1940) to an audience from RIBA and the Town Planning Institute.⁶⁹ Eventually after repeated visits from Julian Huxley, the chairman of the 1940 Films Committee, the BC agreed to appoint a representative.⁷⁰

At the Foreign Office (which funded the British Council) concern with the image of Britain abroad encouraged officials to take a positive and pragmatic attitude to film propaganda on the built environment. When asked to comment on the treatment for the British Council’s film on the history of town planning they were enthusiastic, even approving some of the more critical aspects of the narrative:

It is just as well to make a clean breast of our slum problems since the foreigner knows that these

⁶⁸ PRO BW 4/17 Memo on BC Film Production, February 1942.

⁶⁹ *The Green Girdle* was made by Strand, and was about London’s 100 square miles of publicly owned countryside.

⁷⁰ Rotha to Grierson, Whit Monday 1941, Folder 7, Box 6, Paul Rotha collection.

exist and the enemy makes capital out of them by reminding the world of their existence. As the public will in the film be shown the proposed remedies, the film can do nothing but good⁷¹.

The war years were a high point for film propaganda on the built environment. The state was funding films on reconstruction, generally made by people committed to reform and well versed in the issues. Moreover, the film-makers were occasionally advised by prominent figures in the planning reform movement as in the case of *When We Build Again* and *Development of the English Town*. However, a closer examination of the sources reveals that many factors were operating to constrain the propaganda message in these films.

The most powerful influences on the shape and content of a film were dictated by the progress of national policy. Film officers at the MOI and BC, as well as the film-makers themselves, were sensitive to national developments. Although, as we have seen, the MOI and other government departments were keen to begin presenting propaganda on post-war policy fairly early in the war, they were constrained by Churchill's opposition. In December 1940, Duff Cooper, the Minister of the MOI, had sent a paper to Churchill on the declaration of post-war policy, which was rejected.⁷² Often it seems the MOI felt paralysed. While Home Intelligence Reports and their own judgement suggested one policy, the political climate favoured inaction. In October 1940 the Home Policy Committee wanted to issue a peace-aims pamphlet. It agreed that:

some definition of peace-aims, especially in regard to home policy, was vital to the work of the Ministry but thought it was difficult to put these

⁷¹ PRO BW4/45 K.T.Gurney (FO) to Primrose secretary of BC Film Department, 8 April 1942.

⁷² Paul Addison, *Churchill on the Home Front*, (1992), p. 360.

aims forward without full government approval. Pamphlets issued by the Ministry, even if brief prints of speeches would inevitably be regarded as having government sanction.⁷³

Later, Brendan Bracken was reprimanded by Churchill when the MOI issued leaflets to the army on the Beveridge Report. This wider political atmosphere naturally affected the actions of Films Division. After a sneak preview in 1941 at the Gaumont, Camden Town, *Goodbye Yesterday* was rejected by Cyril Radcliffe, the Director General.⁷⁴ According to John Taylor, the film's director at Realist Films, Radcliffe felt that it was politically too sensitive and so could not be shown. The film looked at a group of people whose lives were improved by wartime measures and opportunities. Although Radcliffe ordered it to be scrapped it seems that some production stills were prepared which, in tandem with the recollections of the producers, help us to build up a picture of the film. The three stills show the scene in which a group of ordinary people making a film about 'post-war reconstruction' talk to an architect about his ideas. In the first shot a small boy is seen asking the architect about playing fields after the war; in the second, the architect is showing the 'representative group of people' (the boy, a soldier, a young woman and a middle-aged woman) 'new plans of the town'; and in the last still the boy talks to the architect, while the soldier 'waits to put his poser'.⁷⁵ It had an unusual and polemical ending. The questioners sit in a preview theatre assessing the rough cuts and speculating on how it should finish. This device allowed for predictions about the

⁷³ PRO INF 1/249 Minutes of the Home Planning Committee, 'Peace Aims Pamphlet', meeting of 23 October 1940.

⁷⁴ Recorded interview with John Taylor, IWM Sound Archives, accession no: 7259/6, reel 2.

⁷⁵ Stills for a 'Post-war Reconstruction Film. They are making a film about post-war reconstruction. Ten men get together each with his own particular grumble to discuss the problems of post-war planning', captions possibly for *Goodbye Yesterday*, held in the IWM Photograph Archive, Catalogue no.s D11285-D11287.

post-war world, ‘a slightly sinister question mark which boded no good for supporters of the status quo’, as Basil Wright put it.⁷⁶ Taylor suggests that the film’s examination of the social problems of inter-war Britain and its open-ended questioning of the post-war world was too controversial given Churchill's well known opposition to this kind of debate.⁷⁷

Reservations about reconstruction propaganda were not only held by the right, as Rotha discovered in April 1941, when he received a caution from Clement Attlee’s private secretary.⁷⁸ Apparently Attlee was concerned that the supply of essential war materials from the USA could greatly decrease, or even cease, if the Americans thought Britain was likely to become socialist after winning the war, ‘hence’:

our propaganda films should not tell of the reconstruction world to be because reconstruction might be closely associated with reform and reform might mean socialization....Hence again the reason for the maintenance of the British Council kind of “safe” propaganda for overseas.⁷⁹

When Donald Alexander’s film for Paul Rotha Productions, *Five and Under* (about day nurseries) was released in May 1941, Rotha thought that it might not be accepted by its sponsor, the Ministry of Health, because of its controversial ‘message’. One scene is set in a town planning exhibition and the final commentary advocates the building of a new Britain, but it was these elements that he was particularly pleased with, ‘The future sequence, with its message of what must be has a real purpose’.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Basil Wright, *The Long View*, (1974), p. 195.

⁷⁷ Taylor, 7259/6, reel 2.

⁷⁸ Paul Rotha wrote an article for the *New Statesman* attacking the British Council’s film policy which was published in the edition of the week 11 March 1941.

⁷⁹ Paul Rotha diary, 2nd April 1941, Book 1, Folder 16, Box 23, Paul Rotha collection.

⁸⁰ Paul Rotha diary, 26 May 1941, p. 62, Book: 1, Folder 16, Box 23, Paul Rotha collection.

At the BC the makers of *The Development of The English Town* had to keep a weather eye on national legislation. During discussions over the first draft of the script, Alfred Bossom MP⁸¹, who had been brought into advise on the film, said that although a film on planning and reconstruction was needed, progress on the film should not get ahead of the new town planning legislation. He expected this legislation to be much emasculated as plans for the bill were vague and had very little support from the Ministry of Health.⁸²

Even when the Beveridge Report had been released Films Division trod carefully. Ian Dalrymple, Head of the Crown Film Unit (1940-43), recalled: [After] ‘the Beveridge Report I suggested that the Unit should return more to their old role, and prepare films which might be of use in the period of reconstruction, but I was told that it was too early’.⁸³

However, the public furore surrounding the Conservatives’ luke warm reaction to the Report, and Churchill’s own signature on the Atlantic Charter of August 1941, forced a reassessment by the more reactionary forces. In the end Churchill even made a broadcast promising post-war reconstruction, including a commitment to the built environment. For Rotha, the Atlantic Charter was a signal to start investigating a film

⁸¹ Sir Alfred Bossom FRIBA, M.P. Maidstone, Kent. Had worked from 1903 in the USA as an architect. He was also interested in housing reform having been the Chairman of the LCC Slum Clearance Sub-Committee 1930-34. Member of Select Committee on National Expenditure 1939. At this time he was the Chairman of the Amenities Committee of the House of Commons and Lords.

⁸² PRO BW 4/45 Neville Kearney to Philip Guedalla, re. discussion with Bossom, 12 November 1941.

⁸³ Ian Dalrymple, *The Crown Film Unit (1940-43)* draft essay from a speech given at the IWM conference on ‘Film Propaganda and the Historian (An assessment of the British Official film for the study and teaching of the Second World War)’, July, 1973, p. 13. IWM Film and Video Archive.

project on general planning. As the British public were for the first time beginning to feel that they might 'win the war, a film on the peace might be accepted as a stimulus'.⁸⁴ In fact he thought that the 'war-aims' embodied in the Atlantic Charter might form the basis of the film.⁸⁵ Discussions between Rotha and Otto Neurath on a planning film (*Land of Promise*) were partly stimulated by Reith's parliamentary announcement, in the spring of 1942, that he would be setting up a central planning authority.⁸⁶

In this new climate Films Division personnel were able to embark on projects such as *New Towns For Old* (1942), a propaganda film, which encouraged the people to mobilise behind a policy to reconstruct Britain's blighted cities. Helen Forman, who, was working at the Films Division, recalled that discussion in central government about the Beveridge Report and other proposed legislation for reconstruction naturally had an impact on the MOI.

By the autumn of 1943 I was starting projects on "The Future of Housing", "The Future of Town Planning" etc. with the approval of or at the direct request of the ministries concerned... We gave some of them fanciful titles, otherwise Jack Beddington would have been bored. The town planning one was called "Castles in the Air".⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Paul Rotha diary, 18 August 1941, p. 75, Book 1, Folder 16, Box 23, Paul Rotha collection.

⁸⁵ The Atlantic Charter was a list of war aims issued jointly by Churchill and Roosevelt on their first meeting at Placentia Bay off Newfoundland. The eight points were a claim that the US and GB had no aims at territorial aggrandisement; all peoples had a right to select their own form of government; all nations to have equal access to trade and raw materials; all nations to be able to collaborate in the economic field with the aim of securing improved labour standards, economic advancement and social security for all; people should have 'freedom from fear and want' and after the war their should be established a 'wider and more permanent system of general security'. Quoted in Angus Calder, *The People's War: 1939-1945*, (1969). pp. 263-264.

⁸⁶ Neurath to Rotha 16 February 1942, 1/42, Otto and Marie Neurath Archive, Department of Graphic Design, Reading University.

⁸⁷ Letter from Helen Forman (née de Mouilpied) to Nicholas Pronay, 18 January 1981, in the IWM Film and Video Archive.

As Forman's recollections indicate, this new atmosphere also affected other government departments. The creation of the Ministry of Town and Country Planning in February 1943 and the interim Town and Country Planning act of July, were the first concrete results of the government's forays into planning reform. The new Ministry recognised the importance of public relations by appointing Sir Stephen Tallents as PR officer. Tallents had been closely associated with the development of publicity film at the Empire Marketing Board and the GPO. He had even written an influential book stressing the value of film for the nation's image abroad.⁸⁸ His was just the kind of appointment that officials at the MOWP had argued was necessary to publicise planning reform when public expectations were high but the likelihood of significant legislation low. Tallents was keen to use film, and a number of projects were undertaken during his tenure. He hoped eventually to commission an innovative documentary along the lines of *World of Plenty*⁸⁹, but the first project discussed seriously was more pedestrian, a film for 'home propaganda' to explain the 'planning of a small town'.⁹⁰ By the summer of 1944, with some towns and cities already submitting reconstruction plans to the Ministry of Town and Country Planning (MOTCP), film projects could be illustrated with material on specific towns. The director Graham Tharp, researching in the Midlands for an MOI film on reconstruction for the MOTCP, was particularly struck by the plans being prepared for the redevelopment of the town of Bilston, and it was agreed that the town should be put forward as the subject of the film.⁹¹ But even during this more relaxed period, film production was still bound by the progress of legislation. During discussion for the

⁸⁸ Sir Stephen Tallents, *The Projection Of England*, (1932) republished by Olen press, 1955.

⁸⁹ PRO INF 1/214 Pt.4 Stephen Tallents (MOTCP) to Paul Rotha, June 1943.

⁹⁰ PRO FO 370/37 St.J.Bamford (MOI) to Paliaret (FO), referring to the film at the script stage being produced in consultation with Tallents.

⁹¹ PRO HLG 52/1177 Stephen Tallents to Neal 19 July 1944.

national parks film *Park Here*, officials at the MOI noted that production was to be synchronised with the Hobhouse Committee reports and government legislation.⁹²

Within the parameters created by national policy, the film producing agencies of the MOI and BC had direct control over the production of films on reconstruction. The political stance of these departments also impinged on film-making. As has been indicated earlier, the MOI saw the value of presenting post-war policy on issues such as unemployment and housing long before Churchill and others were willing to do so. Civil servants at the MOI, even an arch Conservative such as Brendan Bracken, saw the rationale behind presenting peace-aims in general terms. However, Bracken was at heart a reactionary and no great reformer, a position which he made clear during the general election campaign and there exists plenty of evidence of the conservatism of senior MOI personnel.⁹³ Basil Wright recalled that ‘right through the war there remained this drag of reaction’ and reluctance to make films that spoke of the future.⁹⁴ Film-makers like Wright and Paul Rotha have perhaps overplayed this theme as this view emphasises the vanguard role of the documentary radicals. But what is clear from the documents and personal testimony is that senior MOI personnel were anxious for the department to appear politically impartial. A.J.P. Taylor, who was a speaker for the MOI, was warned not to offend the political parties: ‘You know how the BBC goes on now with all this political balance. Well, the MOI were a hundred times worse’.⁹⁵

⁹² PRO HLG 108/7 A.F.Bundy, 7 November 1945.

⁹³ See T.Haggith, ‘Post-war Reconstruction as Depicted in Ministry of Information Films of the Second World War’, *Imperial War Museum Review* 7 (1992).

⁹⁴ Basil Wright, proceedings of the 1973 IWM conference on ‘Film Propaganda and the Historian’, pp. 11-12, in the IWM Film and Video Archive.

⁹⁵ *ibid.* p. 6.

The MOI was an unusual institution as it had to rely on the talents and skills of writers, journalists, and film-makers who were often left-wing. The first Minister, Lord Reith, was aware that 'the greater proportion of persons likely to be of use to the ministry in a creative capacity would be of left-wing tendency'. And he warned officials to be careful when recruiting them not to inflame public opinion which was already complaining of left-wing bias.⁹⁶ But MOI leaders were quite willing to co-opt more overtly radical characters if they could be useful: 'In the case of the discussions it was noted that converted left-wing speakers had undertaken to help and it had been suggested that they should make clear the results of a Nazi victory'.⁹⁷

Jack Beddington, Director of Films Division for most of the war, was well aware of the political views of some film-makers employed by the MOI, but was not worried that control would be lost. When discussing the appointment of Thorold Dickinson as director for a film on India, for example, Beddington commented in a knowing fashion that while Dickinson was a little too much of the 'leftist intelligentsia' he assumed that he would come into line as the project developed.⁹⁸ The majority of these radical characters were employed on a contract basis and did not have full-time positions at Senate House. Thus Laurie Lee, Dylan Thomas and the Trotskyist Reg Groves all worked on scripts for MOI films by independent documentary companies. In fact none of the radical figures in documentary like Paul Rotha or Max Anderson worked at The Crown Film Unit, MOI's own production company. As a result they were kept at arm's

⁹⁶ PRO INF 1/848 Minutes of the MOI Policy Committee, meeting of 15 March 1940.

⁹⁷ PRO INF 1/848 Minutes of the MOI Policy Committee, meeting of 23 May 1940

⁹⁸ India Office Archives, L/I/1/693, July 1943.

length by the MOI and were unable to impinge in any meaningful way on production policy. The film people employed at Films Division were established figures whose common characteristics were ability and experience rather than political perspective. Jack Beddington was a good example, before the war he had fostered documentary when head of Public Relations at Shell.⁹⁹ Documentary was well represented among Films Division staff with people like Beddington and Arthur Elton but there were also people in important roles from the more conservative commercial industry like Sidney Bernstein and Edward Villiers.¹⁰⁰

Official supervision of a production did not end once a film company had been selected. The Planning Committee minutes and other MOI Films Division documents indicate that fairly close monitoring was maintained throughout production. Film officers required budgets, examined treatments, scripts and were particularly sensitive to anything that might be politically controversial. Basil Wright recalled that dialogue between Films Division staff and film-makers hardly occurred over instructional and educational films: 'but disagreement quickly mounted when we came to the wider aspects of wartime information, especially in its hortatory aspects, and in the treatment of war aims (because of course, war aims involve what was going to happen when peace eventually came)'.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ The films made at Shell were largely technical and instructional films with virtually no political content.

¹⁰⁰ Sidney Bernstein owned the Granada Cinema chain and was put in charge of MOI Film distribution in the USA. Sir Edward Villiers was the director of New World Pictures Ltd. When the war started he was appointed to oversee the newsreel section of the MOI, then Press and Censorship from April to December 1940 and finally was the DDG from December 1940 to September 1941.

¹⁰¹ Basil Wright, proceedings of the 1973 conference, p. 8, in the IWM Film and Video Archive.

Films Division's output was also vetted. Jack Beddington was required to arrange regular monthly or fortnightly screenings 'at which members of the Committee and other senior officials of the ministry could be shown circuit films'.¹⁰² Perhaps it was at one of these screenings that *A City Reborn* (1945), about the plans for the reconstruction of Coventry, aroused the disapproval of the Director General of the MOI who 'objected to certain portions of the film which had the appearance of political propaganda' and these portions were duly cut.¹⁰³

It was not unusual for films to be abandoned if they did not receive official approval, as happened with *Goodbye Yesterday*. Films were abandoned for a variety of reasons, some political, but more often because events had overtaken the subject of the film or it was simply too difficult to shoot. Film officers were as concerned with stylistic matters as political considerations. John Taylor, of Realist Films, found that film officers were more likely to intervene for these reasons: 'It was much more interference in the way of interpreting the thing, of whether the message the film was carrying was clear or not. It all depended whether we knew what we were doing or they did.'¹⁰⁴ Stylistic concerns about clarity of message or ensuring that a film was not dull could have an impact on any political message that a film-maker was trying to impart. This proved to be one of the factors influencing the production of *Development of the English Town* (dealt with below).¹⁰⁵ Sometimes a film on a political subject was not made because it

¹⁰² PRO INF 1/249 Minutes of the Home Planning Committee, meeting of 3 April 1941.

¹⁰³ PRO INF 6/616 File on *A City Reborn*.

¹⁰⁴ Taylor, 7259/6.

¹⁰⁵ See also discussions of *Strategy of Manpower* in T.Haggith 'Post-war Reconstruction as Depicted in Official British Films of the Second World War', (Msc dissertation, Birkbeck, UL, 1991).

proved impossible to present the ideas on film. A film on the Beveridge Report was eventually dropped for this reason.¹⁰⁶

In addition to these internal checks films were subject to examination by Ministries whose sphere of responsibility was covered in the film. In the case of *Park Here* the Ministry consulted (Ministry of Town and Country Planning) was actually the film's sponsor. But with all the other films on the built environment made during the war, when the BC or MOI were the sponsors, relevant Ministries were routinely sent first treatments, various versions of the script, and invited to screenings of the finished film. The MOI financed film, *New Towns For Old* (1942), was examined during production by public relations officers in the Ministries of Works and Building and Health. In the case of *The Development of the English Town* the BC Film Committee consulted with the Foreign Office and the Ministries of Health, Works and Building and later Works and Planning and the Ministry of Town and Country Planning.¹⁰⁷

Involvement by other ministry officials was often extremely close. During shooting public relations officials and other advisers would be on the set to advise filmmakers, and ensure that technical details and other matters were correctly related on film. Ministry of Agriculture officials on location with *New Acres*, even took some of the roles in the film. Officials scrutinising films on the built environment took great interest in their task, examining scripts minutely and asking for many slight adjustments to be made.¹⁰⁸ Political issues were uppermost in their minds but style also concerned them.

¹⁰⁶ Helen Forman, proceedings of 1973 conference, p. 40, IWM Film and Video Archive.

¹⁰⁷ PRO BW 4/45.

¹⁰⁸ PRO BW 4/45 Ministry of Works and Planning to A.F.Bundy (BC) 30 December 1945.

Many officials behaved like frustrated film-makers, suggesting new visual scenarios and offering whole passages of script. Moreover, they soon complained if they were not consulted at every stage of production. During production of *The Development of the English Town*, Jean Copeland at the Ministry of Health became annoyed that she had been sent a draft treatment then not consulted until she was invited to the first screening.¹⁰⁹ Mary Field, the director of this film, found civil service interference irritating, particularly as it tended to prolong the production process. However, external ministries wielded a good deal of power and it was not unusual for them to ban a film once it was completed.¹¹⁰

On top of all these problems, film-makers faced difficulties created by wartime shortages. Because of the general contraction of the film industry, film-makers had to look for most of their work on government contracts. Independent film-makers also complained that the Crown Film Unit got the lion's share of equipment and even personnel. Moreover, it was virtually impossible to make a film without government approval as film stock was rationed and could only be purchased with a Board of Trade Licence, which in turn could not be got without MOI consent. All other resources needed for film-production, such as petrol, costumes, and props, were also strictly controlled. Once a film-maker was commissioned by the MOI or BC these resources could be obtained, but it was difficult to be profligate due to internal budgetary restrictions which were in turn monitored by the Treasury. There were even problems when the time came for printing in the film laboratories such as Humphries and Studio Film Labs. Rotha had

¹⁰⁹ PRO BW 4/45.

¹¹⁰ PRO INF 1/199, 'Abandoned Films List', 11 May 1942. *A Visit To The Town Hall* was completed at a cost of £2093 but not shown due to the objections of the Ministry of Health,

particular problems obtaining the negative of *Blood Transfusion* (1942) because the labs, whose technicians had not been categorised as a reserved occupation, were short-staffed.¹¹¹

Development of the English Town and Garden Cities

The general context of state-sponsored film production will now be examined with reference to two British Council films on the built environment. Unfortunately, the records of MOI productions are sparse so it is difficult to make comparisons. However, it is likely that films such as *New Towns For Old* experienced similar conditions to these British Council films.

The Development of the English Town (1943) looked at the history of town settlements. The idea for the film initially came out of discussions between Mary Field of GB Instructional and Frederic Osborne, the President of the TCPA, which occurred when they met, in May 1941, at the 'Living in Towns' exhibition organised by CEMA and the 1940 Council. They took the theme of the exhibition, the development of the English town, as the basis for what Osborne suggested should be an 'instructional in the widest sense of the word rather than a documentary'.¹¹² They sought finance for the project from the British Council who, as has been shown, was already considering making a film on town planning. One suspects that Osborne and Field hoped the film would be distributed in Britain as well as abroad, the normal destination of Council

¹¹¹ Paul Rotha diary, 16 December 1941, p. 90, Book 1, Folder 16, Box 23, Paul Rotha Collection.

¹¹² Mary Field to Lockett, 29 May 1941, Films on Planning file, FJO Archive, Welwyn Garden City Local Studies Archive.

films. It is hard to believe that Osborne would have taken any more than an academic interest if he had not thought the film would contribute to the TCPA's overall campaign in Britain. In fact he performed the role diligently throughout the long production, and at the outset stated that despite believing 'objective, scientific reasons' indicated a good future for town planning, he had 'some grave doubts that it will happen'; he therefore took 'the thesis of the film as one which must be very responsibly prepared'.¹¹³ He also had high hopes for the project believing that the film could rival Lewis Mumford's *The City*.¹¹⁴

The Council agreed to take on the project with Osborne as the script adviser to Mary Field. This was potentially a powerful role for Osborne, which he clearly intended to exploit, seeing it as an opportunity to create film propaganda that would stress the TCPA's favoured solution to urban blight - the garden city. In particular he did not want architects to have any input. When Mary Field suggested that Judith Ledeboer (FRIBA)¹¹⁵, a member of the film committee of the 1940 Council, could also advise on the film, Osborne tactfully but firmly rejected the idea, arguing that although other members of the committee 'might have been useful as an alternative to myself' some did not share his views on planning and 'suffer, I think from over-emphasising one aspect of planning too much'.¹¹⁶ Clearly, there was more at stake here than Osborne's renowned ego.

¹¹³ Osborne to Field, 2 October 1941, Films on Planning file, FJO Archive.

¹¹⁴ Osborne to Field, 18 June 1941, Films on Planning file, FJO Archive.

¹¹⁵ After the war Judith Ledeboer designed the Neighbourhood Units for the new town at Hemel Hempstead.

¹¹⁶ Osborne to Field, 11 September 1941, Films on Planning file, FJO Archive.

Osborne's input meant that the final film had a slight preference for the garden city and shots were included of Welwyn and Letchworth. However, the TCPA did not have it all their own way. Although the British Council had sought Osborne's help, it was assiduous in consulting 'various architectural bodies interested in the subject' as well as the Ministries of Health, and Works and Buildings.¹¹⁷ Right up to the end of production, architects continued to have an input, and Jane Drew (FRIBA) was invited to the private screening of the film in May 1943. She praised the film but was critical that it did not show any examples of modern British architecture and would suggest to foreigners that Britain was architecturally backward. She and her colleague Judith Ledeboer suggested a number of British buildings that would counteract this impression. They also put forward their alternative solution to the garden city scenario illustrated in the film. They argued that much future rebuilding would be in towns, not just garden cities, and they were positive that this form of reconstruction could be successful:

In future we hope that a large part of rebuilding will take place in the town, where a better form of town life will develop, as well as the garden city form which your film illustrates. Housing will not only be in houses, but in terraces and flats with the accompanying open spaces and town facilities. There are good flats by Maxwell Fry at Ladbroke Grove...¹¹⁸

As a result of their comments the British Council asked Mary Field to include some shots of the buildings they had suggested during the re-edit.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ PRO BW 4/56 Minutes of the British Council Film Committee, 6 March 1942.

¹¹⁸ PRO BW 4/45 Letter from Jane Drew and Judith Ledeboer to A.F. Primrose, secretary of the BC Film Department, 23 June 1943.

¹¹⁹ PRO BW 4/45 Bundy to Mary Field, 2 July 1943. In the end the re-edit does not seem to have taken place as it would have required a costly re-shoot. Field to Primrose, 15 April 1942.

Film production was also influenced by the internal concerns and interests of the BC. The primary concern of the Film Department was the propaganda affect of its films overseas. During the making of *The Development of the English Town*, Mary Field had lengthy negotiations with Neville Kearney, the director of the Film Department, and Alfred Bossom MP, who were keen to remove the critical slant of Field's historical survey of English town development. They felt that the film, apart from a ghost figure that introduced each period, was 'too gloomy and depressing' and over-critical of Britain's historical development. It suggested:

that the whole of our civilised development was based on selfishness and greed of the few, without any thought of the community, which is not true, although both the Germans and Italians would like the world to believe it.¹²⁰

Neville Kearney was concerned that the writer 'had an idée fixe and some axe to grind', when this film should stress Britain's progress in the field. Thus Kearney and Bossom suggested to Field that she devote less of the film to a historical review and more to how a future planned Britain could be created, in this way achieving a more effective piece of propaganda.¹²¹ This suggestion to strengthen the forward-looking aspect of the film went through various mutations, beginning with a discussion between an airman and a group of munitions workers about what features they would like in their post-war town. In the final script the characters are gone but the list of features remains.

Production records for the film reveal that discussions over its content and style were closely related to the government's shifting policy position on the built

¹²⁰ PRO BW 4/45 Primrose to Field, 28 October 1941.

¹²¹ PRO BW 4/45 Bossom to Kearney.

environment. There was a notable contrast between official reactions to Mary Field's treatment of October 1941 and to the finished film of May 1943. When the comparatively radical first treatment was submitted to the Ministry of Works and Building, the reaction was favourable.¹²² However, as the government began to retreat from the radical policy on reconstruction taken by Lord Reith, Ministries became more cautious over public statements. In a discussion with McAllister about the script in the Spring of 1942, Field detected this change in mood when he was 'guarded and mysterious' and she gathered that 'there had been a general upheaval over their films and their film policy'.¹²³ At the end of 1942 when submitting her commentary to the BC she predicted that it would not be entirely acceptable to the Ministry of Works and Planning who had a 'general tendency to avoid direct statement.'¹²⁴ She was right, as the Ministry requested several close textual changes to moderate the tone of the script.¹²⁵ Five months later, following a re-cut of the finished film, the Ministry of Town and Country Planning expressed further disquiet. George Pepler was anxious that the public should understand that planned development must take time, since, at the end of the First World War, public pressure to build had led to the errors of unplanned construction. To emphasise this point he requested that a sentence now cut be restored - 'It will take time but it can be done' - and that this point be reinforced by adding the following to the last paragraph of the script:

We can with all our knowledge and experience, so plan as to earn good marks for the future, but we must remember that planning is only the first step and that the best of plans will be brought to nought unless we are sufficiently team-minded and patient enough to allow time and opportunity

¹²² PRO BW 4/45 Gill McAllister, Ministry of Works and Building to Primrose, 2 March 1942.

¹²³ PRO BW 4/45 Field to Primrose, 15 April 1942.

¹²⁴ PRO BW 4/45 Field to Primrose, 1 December 1942.

¹²⁵ PRO BW 4/45 Script, version dated 30 December 1942.

for these plans to be carried out in sequence.¹²⁶

The BC did not agree to this supplementary sentence, but reinstated the essence of the cut line with: 'This has already begun in Britain. To make it general will take time, but it is well worth working and waiting for'.

Correspondence between the producers and the Council at the end of the production, provides further evidence of the political difficulties of committing this particular subject to film. The head of GB Instructional, Bruce Woolfe, wrote to the Council to complain that the film had been 'chopped about and modified' because of its continual intervention. The British Council agreed that a new system needed to be evolved to overcome such problems, but explained that this case had been unusual:

But I think we must bear in mind that this particular film is not an easy one to make, and has certain controversial implications which may not meet the views of everyone, and it behoves us, therefore, to be especially careful.¹²⁷

Frederic Osborne's project for the BC on garden cities also suffered as a consequence of interventions by those Ministries who were unwilling to issue any clear public statements on the preferred form of British reconstruction. In June 1942 the British Council approached Osborne to prepare a treatment for a film they intended to make on garden cities. Not surprisingly Osborne agreed to help, submitting his treatment in July 1942. The Council passed on copies to the Ministries of Works, and Planning and Health. The most telling criticism made by both Ministries was that the treatment

¹²⁶ PRO BW 4/45 George L. Pepler (MOTCP) to BC Film Department, 28 May 1943.

¹²⁷ PRO BW 4/45 Anonymous letter from the BC Film Department to Bruce Woolfe of GB Instructional, 26 July 1943.

offered garden cities as the only solution to congested urban development, and moreover, that a consensus on this issue did not yet exist. The Ministry of Health specifically contested the proposed film's condemnation of flats, arguing that other research showed that many people favoured them and that terraced housing had many advantages over detached housing.¹²⁸ The Ministry of Works and Planning put forward a subtle critique and suggestion. It said that the treatment was really an argument about town planning and overlapped to a certain extent with *Development of the English Town*. Moreover, in the present form it would be a propaganda film, particularly as the garden city idea came at the end of the film. Although some officials recognised the success of garden cities, it was clear that the Ministry would not support any film that would tie the state to a garden city policy. Garden cities, it was argued:

represented the speculative and creative efforts of voluntary (as opposed to state) democracy. In this scenario they are represented as the mitigation of an urban evil, whereas one would have thought that they merited in view of their history and success, a more self-contained and descriptive treatment. So it was suggested that garden cities should occupy a much larger portion of the film.¹²⁹

It appears that a historical travelogue, presenting garden cities as successful experiments, even oddities in liberal inter-war England, was the kind of film the ministry would be willing to sanction.

¹²⁸ Ministry of Health official (unidentified) to Bundy, 19 September 1942, Films on Planning file, FJO Archive. Although this was the official position at this stage, by the 1950's many in central government had come to the conclusion that flats were not suitable for families with children. See Penelope Hall, The Social Services of Modern England, (1952), p. 113. A recent and comprehensive examination of the 'house versus flat' debate occurs in Tatsuya Tsubaki's PhD thesis 'Popular Housing Provision in England: 1930-1950's', (1993), University of Warwick. Tsubaki traces the debate from the 1930s to the 1950s, identifying its main protagonists and in particular the nature of popular attitudes to housing types and how these had an impact on policy.

¹²⁹ Ministry of Works and Planning (unidentified) to Bundy, 29 July 1942, Films on Planning file, FJO Archive.

Osborne's reply to the Council was lengthy and combined pique with incredulity. In his preamble to A.F.Bundy of the Film Department, he suggested that the treatment had been read by the wrong person, 'unfamiliar with planning issues', but who had read some of the recent architectural propaganda for flats etc.' He argued that his critics had misunderstood the thrust of the treatment: garden cities were not the only remedy for congested urban development, they were 'an essential part of the remedy to open out congested cities'. In defence of this position, he cited the Barlow Commission and the Scott and Uthwatt reports as evidence that government thinking was moving in this direction.¹³⁰ Rather tactlessly Osborne confirmed for his critics the propagandist aims that lay behind the structure of the proposed film:

The object of the film should be educational propaganda to educate the public as to constructional ideas upon which reconstruction or part of it may be based. Thus concentrating on interests on Welwyn or Letchworth was less important than exploring the ideas on which they were based.¹³¹

Given Osborn's trenchant and unyielding letter it is not surprising that the Council now turned to the more malleable professional film maker Mary Field of GB Instructional to prepare a treatment. Although Osborne was still given the opportunity to comment on the script, his role was downgraded.

However, despite a more neutral script, the Ministry of Town and Country Planning remained unhappy about a film that displayed a garden city preference. Sir

¹³⁰ Osborne to Bundy, 24 September 1942, Films on Planning file, FJO Archive.

¹³¹ Ibid.

Stephen Tallents (PRO at the new Ministry) suggested that the bias in the film could be avoided by substituting ‘one answer to the question for the answer to the question’ regarding urban congestion.¹³²

In the end the project was abandoned by the British Council. Apparently the main reason was because there had been difficulty obtaining colour film stock from the USA. However, when it eventually arrived in Britain the Film Department decided first to use it for a film on the English village.¹³³ A year later Field's comments to Osborn about the project implied that the Council's reasons for abandoning it had not been circumstantial: ‘we can join together about denouncing the BC who have done nothing about the garden cities film’.¹³⁴

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that there was considerable wartime support for films on the reconstruction of the built environment both within and outside government. These films were seen to have a number of uses: promoting Britain's image overseas as a progressive nation; maintaining the morale of the people during the Blitz and other wartime privations; using film to inform the debate on reconstruction; and most political of all, to create a ground-swell of popular support to ensure that radical post-war reconstruction would occur.

The events of the war, parliamentary discussion and trends in popular attitudes helped to stimulate production of films and shape and constrain their content. It is

¹³² Stephen Tallents (MOTCP) to Bundy, 6 July 1943, Films on Planning file, FJO Archive.

¹³³ Mary Field to Osborne, 7 July 1943, Films on Planning file, FJO Archive.

¹³⁴ Field to Osborne, 25 July 1944, Films on Planning file, FJO Archive.

striking that despite an influx into government of film-minded people in favour of radical reconstruction, control remained with those conservative forces who had a pragmatic attitude to peace-aims propaganda, rather than an ideological commitment to reconstruction.

The British Council film case studies have revealed that although key figures in the reconstruction movement assisted with the preparation of propaganda films, the final say remained with the Ministries responsible. These studies also underline the lack of consensus on the ideal model for reconstruction. Thus propaganda was prepared with advice from both those who favoured urban regeneration within cities and the Garden City enthusiasts, who saw the only solution as a migration into satellite towns in the countryside. Until government policy had been established, civil servants preferred films that provided broad information rather than propaganda. These studies also chart the change from the early period of the war, when civil servants and propagandists shared a radical vision for rebuilding Britain, and the later period when there was a retreat. The next chapter will examine how the imagery and technique of the official films related to the debates and context outlined above.

Chapter Three: State Housing and Planning Films of the War.

The previous chapter has explored the institutional and political factors which dictated and constrained the subject matter of officially sponsored films on the built environment. This chapter will examine how these issues were presented in state-sponsored films from 1939 until the replacement of the MOI by the Central Office of Information (COI) in April 1946. It will begin with a chronological overview to demonstrate how political factors dictated the film treatment of housing and planning. It will then discuss how film-makers responded to the special circumstances of war to produce effective propaganda. This will be followed by case studies of key films and an examination of how certain important themes were presented.

From the beginning of the war until April 1946, aspects of the built environment featured in thirty-two government films, including seven official newsreels. The issue was treated in a variety of ways, but this chapter will be chiefly concerned with those films that were directed at the public, rather than specialist instructionals, and within this category special attention will be given to those that looked at reconstruction.

From the start of the war to the Autumn of 1940 propaganda aims did not include proposals for major reconstruction or challenges to the status-quo. At one MOI film production meeting for example, discussion of possible films on the built environment

mainly revolved around informing people how the authorities were coping with housing problems created by the war.¹

The state was concerned to reassure the people at home and encourage a proper and uncritical attitude of patriotism. For this reason early government-funded propaganda films, like *Health in War* (1940) and *The New Britain* (1940), merely reiterated the familiar pre-war theme played out in *The Great Crusade* (1936) or *Health for the Nation* (1939), by presenting Britain as a country of growing prosperity and wide social provision. In *The New Britain*, particularly, the inter-war period is characterised as a time of peaceful and harmonious development, with full employment in modern factories and rapid improvements in housing. The commentary informs us that four million houses were built and ‘A million people exchanged slums for sun’, as a man walks up the path of his suburban semi-detached. Similarly the semi-official propaganda feature film *The Lion Has Wings* (1939), about the RAF, begins with a long sequence of library footage extolling the virtues of life in Britain, including advances that had been made in slum clearance and house construction. Stylistically these films adopted the same approach as pre-war films with which the government had been involved: a non-dramatic documentary format, mixing library footage and new sequences, with a commentary.

By early 1941 the political context in which films were being made had begun to change. The fall of France had led to a change in political leadership. Churchill became Prime Minister, but more significantly a Cabinet re-shuffle brought in Labour politicians,

¹ Non-Theatrical Films - Proposed Production, Minutes of MOI Film Production Meeting, July 1940, Helen Forman (née de Mouilpied) Papers. *Neighbours Under Fire* (1940) is a good example of such a film.

such as Hugh Dalton and Morrison, apparently committed to addressing issues of political and social reform. Their demands for change, and the devastation of the blitz, forced Churchill to make some gestures towards initiating reform by appointing Lord Reith to the Ministry of Works and Building and, in January 1941, appointing Arthur Greenwood as Minister without portfolio responsible for reconstruction.

The inclusion of Ernest Bevin, as Minister of Labour, indicated the high value the state now put on labour issues and industrial harmony. This was reflected in the way the working-class, and what were perceived as its concerns, were presented in countless officially sponsored films and portrayed in feature films in an unpatronising and sympathetic light.²

The Blitz was extremely important in focusing attention on a new start for Britain's towns and cities. The idea of building a new and better environment, out of the rubble of war, had an attractive and powerful symbolism that lent itself to propaganda in a variety of forms. This propaganda was assisted by the pronouncements for the building

² Feature films such as *The Stars Look Down* (1939), *Love on The Dole* (1941), and *Millions Like Us* (1943) are an indication of a shift in the interests of British feature film-makers towards subjects which looked at the lives of the working-class. This trend was also made possible by the relaxing of the attitudes of the British Board of Film Censors to films which portrayed industrial conflict and the problems of unemployment. For example before the war the BBFC had twice prevented the production of a film version of Walter Greenwood's novel *Love on the Dole* because of its depiction of poverty and a sequence in which strikers fought with the police. Similarly, *Tidal Waters* (1932) a project for a film on striking Thames watermen, had to be dropped because of the film censors' objection to it as political propaganda. The fate of both of these projects is described in Jeffrey Richards, 'The British Board of Film Censors and Content Control in the 1930s images of Britain', *Historical Journal of Radio, Film and Television*, 2 (1981), pp. 111-112. In fact the BBFC strategy to prevent films reaching the screen which portrayed the social problems or class-conflict of the British depression, indeed the realities of much of contemporary working-class life, has led Richards to characterise the 1930s cinema as an 'unreal world dominated by musicals and detective stories'. For similar reasons it proved impossible to obtain BBFC approval for the general circulation of the Soviet films *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *Strike* (1924), and *Mother* (1926). See Ivor Montague, *The Political Censorship of Films*, (1929), pp. 12-14.

of a new world made during the signing of the Atlantic Charter. At the MOI and BBC officials directed propaganda efforts to focus on these plans and discussions.³

Film-makers saw this opportunity and endeavoured to incorporate proposals on physical reconstruction. During the production of *Heart Of Britain* (1941), about the contribution of the Midlands to the war effort, the film-makers asked the City Architect for Coventry, if they could shoot plans for the city's reconstruction:

we have taken several shots in Coventry both before and after the bombing, and it would greatly add to the effectiveness of the production if we could indicate the better prospects of the future by adding a few shots of your town planning models, possibly with people working on their construction.⁴

Although these scenes were not eventually filmed, in *Five and Under* (1941) about child-care provision, there is a scene set in an exhibition on town planning, where members of the public are shown examining charts and displays of scale models of planned towns, complete with 'use-zoning' and green belts. A number of other MOI films were prepared and released which offered hope of a fresh start after the war. *The Dawn Guard* (1941), *New Acres* (1941), *Builders* (1942), *Post 23* (1942) and *Come Again* (1943) all employ similar arguments advocating the reconstruction of a new Britain in which a number of problems, especially poverty, unemployment and slum housing, would be eradicated. Paul Rotha was pleased with Donald Alexander's *Five and Under* and hoped it would have important political repercussions:

³ PRO INF 1/864 Note by Mrs Hamilton, 'Policy for Reconstruction', to Home Planning Committee, 18 September 1941. Hamilton suggested that Article six on freedom from fear and want, be used as the basis for propaganda.

⁴ PRO INF 5/77 Letter from Hudson, GPO Film Unit, to E.E.Gibson RIBA, Coventry City Architect, 7 December 1940.

It is the only honest, progressive and socially important film this unit ever is allowed to make. We are proud to have made it. I hope it causes a storm. I hope the British Council and all the reactionary movement for the status-quo ante will see it.⁵

The release of the Beveridge Report at the end of 1942, and more importantly, the public outcry created by the government's negative response to its proposals, produced a political consensus on the left about the need to address reform. Churchill was forced to make a public statement and create a new Ministry to co-ordinate reconstruction, appointing Lord Woolton to head it.⁶

On the surface, things seemed to be going well. In February 1943 a new Ministry of Town and Country Planning was created and in November 1944 new Town Planning legislation was passed. However, behind the scenes, those hopeful for radical reform of the existing planning systems were witnessing retreat and caution by conservatives in local and central government. As a result the legislation tended to financially restrict local authorities from carrying out the kind of bold reconstruction that many had hoped for.

Despite these problems, the planning reformers were very active from 1943-45, with Political and Economic Planning, The Housing Centre, RIBA and the TCPA busy organising public displays and talks around the country. By 1945, these efforts were

⁵ Paul Rotha diary, 19 June 1941, p. 63, Book 1, Folder 16, Box 23, Paul Rotha Collection, 2001, University Research Library, UCLA.

⁶ Churchill made a radio broadcast on reconstruction on 21 March 1943. For further discussion of this episode see Rodney Lowe, 'The Second World War, Consensus and the Foundation of the Welfare State', Twentieth Century British History, 2, (1990), p. 158.

given a fillip as local authorities began to submit preliminary proposals for reconstruction. In Coventry and London the publication of plans was accompanied by displays which seemed to excite a public whose interest in town planning had waned due to cynicism and war-weariness. Moreover, it was not easy to maintain interest in such a complex and unreal subject for ordinary folk.

Responding to these developments, by the end of 1942, government film officers had begun focusing on reconstruction, and particularly the built environment. At the British Council, plans for the film on garden cities had started as early as the summer of 1942, and at the MOI in December Jack Beddington considered acquiring the independently produced film, *When We Build Again* (1942), for non-theatrical distribution.⁷

At the next MOI Film Production Conference it was suggested that a planning film be produced (*A City Reborn*) to satisfy the public's interest in planning.⁸ By February 1943:

Several film officers urged that films should be made now to explain the post-war problems, and that possible solutions should be put forward in a "Brains Trust" form. The obvious difficulties of doing this were discussed. "Strategy of Food" would indicate the war and post-war feeding problems. "Despond of Slough" would put forward different methods of town planning.⁹

⁷ Minutes of MOI Film Production Conference, 22 December 1942, Helen Forman (née de Mouilpied) papers. This title had been acquired by 1944.

⁸ Minutes of MOI Film Production Conference, 30 December 1942, p. 1, Helen Forman Papers.

⁹ 'Reconstruction Themes', Minutes of Production Conference with Film Officers at the MOI, 3 February 1943, Helen Forman Papers.

The optimism of 1942 and 1943 had an impact on film-makers working on various unrelated government projects. At the British Council, a first script for a film on Social Security and National Health Insurance focused on the promise of post-war reforms heralded by the Atlantic Charter and included scenes of Beveridge working on his report.¹⁰ This period also saw the release of *New Towns For Old* (1942) and *Development of the English Town* (1943) which were the first films to concentrate on the built environment.

However, producing films on reconstruction themes was still problematic, because propaganda officials could not yet establish the details of policy. Thus in an MOI production plan outlining the Film Division's programme on 'Post War Planning', it was explained that although titles on housing and agriculture were needed to explain to people what was going on 'around them' and to warn them of 'the jobs that lie ahead', 'The object of the films should be, not to promise or promote any one course of action, but to provide background information on the general problems which can be foreseen now'.¹¹

In July 1945, the Labour Party won the General Election, following a campaign which had emphasised their commitment to house building. The New Towns act of 1946 signified that the government had partially incorporated the ideas of the Garden Cities lobby in its plans for urban redevelopment. However, hopes for a realisation of these plans for Britain seemed bleak at the end of the war. Many urban areas had suffered in

¹⁰ PRO BW4/44 Second Freedom.

¹¹ 'Film Plan Part 5, Post War Planning', p. 1, 20 June 1944. Helen Forman Papers.

the Blitz, and the flying bomb attacks of 1944-5. Three quarters of a million houses had been destroyed or severely damaged during the war.¹² Financially, Britain was facing bankruptcy and there was a severe shortage of building materials and skilled labour to put a vast 'new build' programme in to operation. Demobilisation and the winding-down of war production exacerbated an already acute housing shortage. Across the nation this led to squatting as people used their own initiative to solve problems of overcrowding and homelessness.

By the end of 1944, the government had begun to introduce stop-gap measures to deal with the housing crisis such as the widespread use of pre-fabricated homes and a massive programme of house repair. There was also a clash between central and local government as the Ministry of Town and Country Planning tried to persuade local authorities to moderate expensive reconstruction plans, many of them now being presented to the people in public exhibitions such as the 'Coventry of the Future' exhibition held in October 1945.¹³

Government publicity faced a dilemma, as officials were keen to inform people about the new methods of urban planning and improved house construction which were to be adopted, while in fact there seemed little possibility of these plans being implemented for some time. Civil servants at the Ministries of Works and Health were particularly concerned that ABCA exhibitions on housing had raised the expectations of

¹² Anne Power, Hovels to Highrise: state housing in Europe since 1850, (1993), p. 186.

¹³ PRO HLG 79/127 When Lewis Silkin was preparing the speech he was to give at the opening of the 'Coventry of the Future' exhibition, he was advised by his civil servants to 'soft peddle' the city and the nation's bold planning ideas.

men and women in the services about the 'standard of housing and housing equipment' that would be provided after demobilisation.¹⁴

Despite these problems, government departments believed that film had an important role to play. In August 1945, plans were being discussed to show films on housing and town planning in special programmes to selected audiences of 'local authorities, Tenants' Associations, and other organisations in large towns where the problems of housing and town planning are most acute'.¹⁵

In plans for new productions at the Ministry of Information, films on housing were considered the most important aspect of reconstruction. Helen de Mouilpied wrote that:

We have given housing first place, partly because there has been *World of Plenty* on food supplies, and partly because people do expect to get food, but not homes and jobs.¹⁶

Seven films were then in production, three looking at aspects of the government's emergency housing programme and four focusing on town planning and house construction once the immediate crisis was over. Two films explaining the L.C.C. County of London Plan were being made as well as one more general film on the 'Theory of Planning'. The object of the latter was 'to illustrate the basic principles of planning Anytown. It will be based on one town, but not recognisably so. Good and bad existing examples will be used with large-scale models of new plans'.

¹⁴ PRO HLG 108/11 Memo from T.Fife-Clarke to Mr.John Wrigley, Ministry of Health, 31 August 1945.

¹⁵ Notes for discussion at Film Officers' Meeting, 1 August 1945. Forman Papers.

¹⁶ Memo on film production plans from Helen de Mouilpied to RIO's and Film Officers, 23 November 1944, Forman Papers.

The films released in this period could explain in some detail the proposals that had been prepared for specific cities. *The Plan and the People* (1945), *Proud City* (1945) and *A City Reborn* (1945) explained the plans for the reconstruction of London and Coventry. After 1946 it was also possible for films to make positive statements about the new town. As an indication of the widespread importance and acceptance of reconstruction, the War Office produced their own film on the subject to screen to service personnel. This film, in the ABCA series, *Town and Country Planning* (1946), not only explored the problems of the past- 'Jerry built' housing, unplanned construction, urban sprawl etc.- but clearly advocated planned national development and the creation of satellite towns.

Film also served to prepare people for the less welcome aspects of post-war housing. There was coverage of pre-fabricated housing in official newsreels (e.g. *Worker and Warfront* November 1944) and in the documentaries *A City Reborn* and *Housing in Scotland* (1945). *Town and Country Planning* and *Housing in Scotland* both included short statements by people to camera which illustrated the range of housing needs as well as comments on the anticipated difficulties of reconstruction. Reflecting conditions at the end of the war, *Bomb Repair Speed Up* (1945) looked at the urgent and enormous task being carried out to repair the 75,000 houses damaged by the V1 and V2 rockets.

The context in which wartime propaganda films on the built environment were distributed and shown was very different from that of the inter-war years. The audiences were much larger than anything experienced by documentary film-makers prior to the

war, and also socially broader. Films produced by housing associations and campaigning groups like the Housing Centre might have been seen by at the most 100,000 people at local fund-raising meetings, shows organised at the Housing Centre, and other meetings around the country between 1929 and 1939. By contrast films distributed non-theatrically during the war by the MOI, such as *The People and the Plan* and *A City Reborn*, had a potential audience of four million per year. MOI films designated for the non-theatrical circuit were shown in three ways: by mobile projectionists who travelling in vans took the films to people for whom cinemas were inaccessible; prints borrowed from the Central Film Library; and by special non-theatrical screenings in public cinemas. Films about housing and town planning were also shown at special exhibitions arranged to publicise local reconstruction plans.

Before the war films on housing and planning rarely reached the commercial cinema, mainly because of the resistance of exhibitors to titles which were not primarily designed to entertain. For the exceptions (notably *The Londoners* and *Housing Problems*) which due to critical acclaim and their comparatively high production values were able to secure a limited commercial circulation, according to one generous estimate, audiences of 2 million per year were possible.¹⁷ This situation changed during the war due to an agreement struck between the MOI and the Cinema Exhibitors Association which gave the government a slot in every programme to screen official films free of charge. This began at five minutes and was later extended to fifteen minutes. Although some exhibitors sabotaged this agreement by, for example, running government films in

¹⁷ Memo by Basil R. Ward, 'Proposed Film on Architecture', Minutes of the Council, 6 February 1939, RIBA Archive.

the interval or early morning, this unprecedented access to the commercial cinema meant documentary films reached much larger audiences than had ever been possible.¹⁸ For example in the case of *Dawn Guard* or *New Towns For Old*, which had commercial runs of two to three months, audiences of 1 to 2 hundred million were likely.¹⁹

The war brought the documentary to audiences of a much broader social composition. Films such as *Proud City* were seen by mass audiences largely composed of the young and lower economic groups.²⁰ Wartime non-theatrical distribution (which includes all the films cited here) also had a leaning towards working-class audiences as a large proportion of screenings were in factories or on construction sites. Between 1941 and 1942 for example, one third of all MOI-organised film shows were held in factories.²¹ Such audiences contrasted sharply with the upper and middle-class people who had viewed films such as *The City*, *Silver Lining*, and *Housing Problems* in film societies, and the mass of other non-theatrical groups before the war. Even those organisations where documentaries were shown, which had been set up specifically with the intention of attracting members of the labour movement and working-class, such as the Manchester and Salford Workers Film Society, were soon dominated by middle-class liberals from Manchester's more affluent suburbs.²²

¹⁸ Paul Rotha was told in 1942, that an MOI film in the 5- minute category had a 'certain audience' of 24,700,000 at the 4,700 cinemas then on the circuit. Paul Rotha diary, 22 April 1942, Book 2, Folder 16, Box 23, Paul Rotha collection.

¹⁹ A more detailed explanation for these figures is given in the conclusion. These larger figures were also related to the expansion in general cinema audiences, rising from an annual total of 1,027 million in 1940 to 1,585 million in 1945, see Paul Swann, *British Documentary Film Movement*, (1984), p. 168.

²⁰ Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It* (Oxford, 1986), p. 3.

²¹ 'Beyond the Box Office: The Central Film Library's Work', p. 89, Goldfinger archive, GolEr/402/1, RIBA Archive.

²² Reg Cordwell, recorded interview held in the North West Film Archive, Manchester.

This wider audience naturally dictated the style of these films. Film-makers perceived that they were communicating to a much broader audience than before and had to take this into consideration. Officials responsible for film production were well aware of this and would remind producers of it from time to time.²³ As one wrote: 'Films for mass audiences must have popular appeal, must be made to achieve contact with the audience and must therefore avoid over-intellectualism.'²⁴

These instructions were even more important for films released theatrically which then came into competition with commercial films designed primarily for entertainment. Thus, sponsored wartime films approached the built environment in a stylistically more varied fashion than those before the war, which had tended to be direct, un-embellished and without dramatic technique.²⁵ By contrast *The Dawn Guard*, *New Acres* and *Post 23* were partly or wholly dramatised. It was also common for the characters to address their more significant political aspects of the script to the camera, as if speaking to the audience directly. This was in marked contrast to *New Britain*, *Health In War* and *The Lion Has Wings*, where the narrators unseen and impersonal, tells the audience what has happened in Britain during the inter-war years.

Another new development in *Dawn Guard*, and *Wales*, *Green Mountain*, *Black Mountain* (1943) was the use of narrators with regional accents. This was in sharp contrast to *The Lion Has Wings*, *Health In War* and *New Britain* where the narrator's

²³ According to Rotha in 1942 he was invited to an 'historic meeting' to discuss common issues at the MOI between film-makers, Regional MOI Film Officers, renters and exhibitors. Apparently films, audiences and policy were fully discussed. Paul Rotha diary, 22 April 1942, Book 2, Folder 16, Box 23, Paul Rotha collection.

²⁴ Film Plan 1944/45, Themes and Priorities, Forman Papers.

²⁵ The exception being *Silver Lining* (1935).

accent was standard English. The voice of newsreel commentator E.V.H. Emmett in *The Lion Has Wings* or *New Britain* would have been a familiar one for cinema audiences, but Mass Observation had evidence that films using narrators with colloquial accents were preferred.²⁶ Even before the war people within the film industry were arguing that the tone of British newsreel commentary was inappropriate. Glen Norris, a man who worked for an American newsreel, wrote that of the British Movietone commentators, 'at least three of your voices suffer from what the BBC calls the "Oxford Accent"-badly enough to provoke open jeers in certain parts of the country'.²⁷ Among some documentary film-makers there was a preference for using the voices of 'real' people for stylistic reasons. In a review in the Documentary News Letter of *Dawn Guard* the writer commented approvingly that the 'dialogue passages are dominated by Bernard Miles's quiet and convincing Hertfordshire accent'.²⁸

Official wartime films on the built environment adopted a variety of approaches. Some were purely dramatic, such as *The Plan and The People*, *New Towns For Old* and *A City Reborn*, while others like *The Concrete House* and *New Builders* were really just straightforward instructionals. A common format, adopted for *Proud City*, and *Town and Country Planning*, was to combine human elements with a factual account using charts, diagrams and models. During the production of *Proud City*, the film was described as 'L.C.C. Plan No.2. A survey film to illustrate the principles of the Plan for London as a whole'.²⁹

²⁶ Clive Coultass, 'The MoI and documentary film 1939-45', Imperial War Museum Review, 4 (1989), p.107.

²⁷ Glen Norris, Twentieth Century Fox, 'A Wide Open Letter to Mr. Gerald Sanger', in World Film News, 2 September 1937.

²⁸ Documentary Newsletter, February 1941

²⁹ Memo on MOI film production plans from Helen de Mouilpied, 23 November 1944. Forman Papers.

The more general documentary style was adopted for *Development of the English Town* and *Garden Cities*. These films looked at the theoretical issues behind reconstruction and aimed to present these ideas in a general way. Osborne's plans for *Garden Cities* specified that the film's propaganda role was general and the film must not be particular to one town. This non-dramatic documentary format was really a moving slide show of library footage, interspersed with occasional new sequences and maps and diagrams where appropriate. Generally the script was delivered by an anonymous commentary. In many respects these films were more akin to a leisurely paced newsreel.

It is clear that the sponsors and film-makers felt that films had different roles to play and this dictated the style adopted. *The Plan and The People* was described as a film to explain the human aspects of the greater London plan and was designed to complement the survey film *A Proud City*. *Development of the English Town* was aimed at foreign as well as domestic audiences, so it gave a general indication of how Britain was addressing urban reconstruction.

Up until now the impression may have been that film-makers only had a fairly superficial and technical impact on the films they produced. This is not so. Within the overall constraints described in chapter two, there was creative flexibility and many films bear the particular mark of a particular individual or team. Indeed certain film-makers and production companies became associated with a particular subject. Shell, for example, tended to specialise on technical films. With social issues, films from the Paul Rotha stable were characteristically imbued with a reforming zeal and were often critical

of the status quo. In March 1941 an advert announcing the formation of Rotha Films stated the unit's policy:

we believe that the medium of the film should be used to spread the knowledge needed by all who plan for the post-war world.

In the fields of education, health, medicine and the social sciences, important developments are happening which will greatly influence reconstruction.

We believe that today it is the responsibility of documentary film-makers to produce films and conduct research about those aspects of our life from which will come social changes in the future.³⁰

In fact many film-makers in the documentary film movement were associated with this political approach (e.g. Realist and Strand) and endeavoured to get a more radical message across.

One of the methods used by film-makers to comment on the recent past was to include archive footage of slum conditions and scenes of unemployment. This was first done in *The Dawn Guard* (which had the appropriate working title *True Renewal*), but similar footage taken from 1930s housing films appeared in *Coalminer* (1943), *Wales, Green Mountain, Black Mountain* (1943), and even the British Council film *Architects of England* (1941). Paul Rotha probably spoke for many film-makers who portrayed the thirties in this way, when he said:

I want so many of our films to carry pre-war sequences. We must not give the

³⁰ 'Rotha Films, A New Unit in Documentary, States its Policy', Documentary Newsletter, March 1941.

people one iota of a chance to forget how they gave England into the trust of a handful of unscrupulous selfish and dishonest men. The pre-war days must never be referred to as good, happy or even fairly tolerable. All our propaganda must expose the rottenness of the 1919-39 era. The whole conception of the status-quo ante must once and for all be shattered. That is why the British Council, and the C.C.O. and Foreign Office element behind them, is doing such evil.³¹

By evil, Rotha meant in continuing to present a film image of Britain which was reactionary and ignored the social divisions and inequalities within society.

Particular individuals involved in a film often had a strong impact. Dylan Thomas was the scriptwriter on a number of films, including some discussed in this study (*Wales Green Mountain, Black Mountain, New Towns For Old* and *A City Reborn*). His style was highly distinctive, being both poetic and frequently expressing a degree of passion and anger not seen in other scripts. Thomas who, by his own admission, had no interest or facility for political theory, was emotionally and morally committed to socialism. An expert on his film work describes Thomas as being ‘instinctively of the left’ and ‘one of the few poets of the 1930s who remained steadfast in his political allegiance’.³² The following quote from 1934 is an indication of Thomas’s radicalism: ‘I take my stand with any revolutionary body that asserts it to be the right of all men to share, equally and impartially, every production of man from man and from the sources of production at men’s disposal’.³³

³¹ Paul Rotha diary, 18 August 1941, pp. 79-80, Book 1, Folder 16, Box 23, Paul Rotha Collection, UCLA.

³² John Ackerman, (ed.) *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*, (1995), p. xxiv & xvi.

³³ From *New Verse*, (1934), quoted in Ackerman, *Filmscripts*, p. xvi.

The Dawn Guard (1941) used the romantic device of two rustic Home Guard soldiers, standing by a windmill, to discuss the meaning and implications of the war. The Nazi ‘savages’ are presented as a threat to a timeless tradition of Englishness, but a new note is struck. The younger man points out how the war has given the people an opportunity for a reassessment of England which has led to the realisation that all has not been rosy. Mention is made of the unemployment and housing problems of the inter-war years, illustrated with library footage of slum children. The two men determine that in the post-war period the new-found togetherness and purpose of the war will be channelled into ‘a fine peace effort’, which will bring jobs for all and eradicate the slums. The dialogue is accompanied by images of public housing built by the L.C.C. and scenes in Welwyn Garden City. The Boulting Brothers who made this film for the MOI not long after producing the anti-Nazi feature *Pastor Hall* (1940), wanted it to have an impact on popular attitudes. Roy Boulting recollected:

John [Boulting] and I together with Bernard Miles and Anna Reiner we decided that if the war - at that time [the film was released in January 1941], the bore war, the phoney war - was to have any meaning at all it was going to be fought not to return to the England of the mass unemployment, of appeasement, of class division, and so on and so on, it was going to be fought and hopefully won on the basis that the inequalities the disparities and the poverty and the suffering was going to be ameliorated, if not eliminated entirely, at least the lot of the ordinary man and woman was going to be improved. Very ingenuous, very idealistic, deeply felt, and that is the

film we made.³⁴

When the film was first shown to senior Films Division, staff they were guarded. Roy Boulting recalls that Roger Burford, a scriptwriter and adviser for the Production section, and Sidney Bernstein, who was in charge of US distribution, said nothing. The only one to offer an opinion was John Betjeman, who said ambiguously: 'I'm not sure that I think it's good. I like it'. Boulting believes that they were slightly fearful of releasing such a film because as a 'Government endorsed film...it perhaps went further than the Government at that time wished to go in terms of assurances about the post-war period.'³⁵

This theme was continued in another dramatised short *Post 23* (1942), where the action is set in an ARP post. The characters in the film describe the new sense of community and purpose they have gained from getting involved in ARP work. Drawn from a wide range of class and occupational backgrounds, they stress the new harmony and understanding, springing from their involvement and common purpose. Towards the end of the film one volunteer, who is an architect, wonders out loud what he will build after the war, and an older working-class warden urges him to get rid of the slums.

Five And Under (1941) looked at the problems of child care for the under five's as a result of the massive wartime mobilisation of women. It detailed the various wartime schemes to cope with these problems. Typically, in a film from Paul Rotha's company,

³⁴Recorded interview with Roy Boulting, IWM Sound Archive, accession no. 4627/06, reel 1. The actor Bernard Miles played one of the Home Guard and made script suggestions. Anna Reiner was an Austrian novelist who had been one of the writers with Ernst Toller on *Pastor Hall* (1940)

³⁵ Boulting, 4627/06, reel 1.

there was an attempt to move beyond the informational role of the film to examine the behavioural problems of children in a day nursery, blaming their disruptive and violent activity on the dislocation created by the Blitz but also the slum housing where the children lived. The narrator argued that although the children were benefiting from high quality nursery care, this work could be undone when they returned home. In post-war Britain, high-quality nursery provision must be accompanied by an improved urban environment to assist childhood development:

We've allowed two things to happen, slums and the war. But we don't want mothers and kids to become estranged.....Because in the bright new towns we shall build, towns different from the dirty muddled cities of the present, places of light and space and air, we must have education centres open to all. The day nursery and nursery school will be a part of these centres like the school clinic, the library, the kitchen and the theatre....This is part of the new Britain which we women must help to build for our children.

New Towns For Old (1942) was an MOI title for screening in the five minute cinema slot reserved for official films.³⁶ Although made for the Ministry of Health, during production, public relations officers of the Ministry of Works were asked to comment on the script. From February to April 1942 Gilbert McAllister, Bradshaw and George Pepler of the Planning Department, made a number of suggestions including using Sheffield as the location of the film.³⁷ The finished film reflected the wish of the two Ministries to inform the people about proposals for post-war reconstruction. Significantly, it was to be released in two versions, one aimed at a national audience in

³⁶ *New Towns for Old* (1942), sp: MOI, pc: Strand Films, pr: Alexander Shaw, dir: John Eldridge, camera: Jo Jago, sc: Dylan Thomas, 7 mins.

³⁷ PRO HLG 71/1253 Letter from A.M.Jenkins to E.S.Hill, on public relations work in the Planning Department, 4 August 1942.

which the town featured is called Smokedale, and another just for local release in Sheffield, where it is referred to by its actual name, and the council's work to clear the slums and implement future reconstruction plans is detailed. The comments by an MOI official quoted in the local press and the involvement of the public relations section of the Ministry of Works and Planning suggest that this film was partially designed to encourage other British cities 'to plan boldly' as Reith had requested. The MOI official explained that:

Sheffield has been chosen for this film, which is under the auspices of the MOI, because it is considered to be a leading example to other cities going well ahead with an organised scheme for post-war planning.³⁸

The film was set in an ugly Northern industrial town called 'Smokedale'. The drama records a discussion between a local councillor and a bowler-hatted, black-coated Southerner. The councillor gives him a tour around the town's slums, smoky factories and homes. The Southerner is initially blind to these eyesores: 'The homes are fit to live in, they are not condemned are they?' He is also against any proposals to plan the town: 'But you can't move a town round like that'. Then, with the aid of charts of the re-zoned town, the councillor explains the work that had already been done to clean it up through slum clearance, and moving homes away from factories. This job had been interrupted by the war but they were now planning work for the new town to be rebuilt in the period of reconstruction. The film ends with a discussion on how the plans to rebuild all Britain's cities can be realised, the responsibility being placed on the people's shoulders.

³⁸ The Sheffield Star, 27 April 1942

This film's dramatised form allowed the film-makers to create a debate in which could be set out two opposing positions on urban redevelopment. The mouthpiece for each argument is a crude but significant archetype. The working-class, sensible Yorkshireman represents those people of the old industrial regions that suffered most during the depression but are grasping their own destiny. The councillor, described as the 'progress man', was played by a local man who worked in the Corporation Parks Department.³⁹ By contrast 'why-bother-man' is a middle-class, home counties type, a representative of a section of the population that had prospered during the inter-war years. More importantly, for the sake of this debate, he is a caricature of cynical, apathetic people who are highly sceptical of the plans to rebuild Britain and, even worse, seem to be unaware of the problems of the slums.⁴⁰ This character can also be seen to represent the audience's questioning mind, which hopefully by the end of the film will have been persuaded by the force of the councillor's argument. The final acceptance by 'why bother man' of the councillor's proposal to replan all Britain's cities along more rational and humane lines, also served a wider propaganda purpose: the uniting of people of all classes and regions.

The film never suggested how money was to be provided to finance such a massive undertaking. The point is that it is up to the audience to exercise its collective political muscle to ensure British towns were rebuilt. Significantly the town's redevelopment is shown to have taken place since the election of the 'new council',

³⁹ Mr Castleton.

⁴⁰ Both the characters titles were given in The Star article. The 'why-bother-man', was played by a local actor Laurie Lingard.

which was probably a reference to the election of Sheffield's first Labour administration in 1926.

Given the account of the making of the *Development of the English Town* (1943) in chapter two, it is not surprising that the final film took a far more conservative view of the subject than *A New Towns for Old*. It traced the history of the English town from the Romans to the war, ending with proposals for the future. It highlights the particular planning obsession of each age such as defence, trade, industry, and housing, ideas that had been of value for only relatively short periods and had resulted in the distortion of urban development. It ends by listing the various features, or planning ideas, that should be harmonised by planning reconstruction so as to avoid the past error of concentrating town redevelopment around one idea.

Although the film's main focus was on the recent problems of town planning, its long-term survey moderates contemporary criticism of twentieth century town building. This moderating effect is reinforced by a ghost who appears throughout the film to defend the planners of each era. For example, a Victorian ghost appears to remind the audience that although the industrial revolution brought slums and smoke, it also contributed to the nation's wealth and made food and luxuries affordable for all. Despite this cautious approach to town planning, the film was nonetheless critical of the problems produced by industrialisation. Part of its commentary ran:

And what about the men, women and children
who tended these machines? Where did they
sleep when they left the factories? Their
houses as you see here, were huddled
together without plan or order. What sort
of life could people live in places like

these? How could they live a healthy
balanced life?

But the commentary adds that out of the growth of industry came the new progressive planning ideas pioneered in industrial green-field towns such as Port Sunlight and the Garden City movement. It suggests 'the very evil produced its remedy'.

A City Reborn (1945)⁴¹ begins in a crowded train where three of the passengers who are heading for Coventry discuss why they are going to the city. There is Wilf, a young soldier, who is seeing his wife for the first time after three years of combat, Mr. Evans, a middle-aged engineer posted to one of the city's factories, and a young woman who has also been sent to a munitions factories and is nervous about leaving home and moving into a government hostel. The film cuts to a brief history of Coventry from its medieval origins as a monastery through to its growth as a textile producer, industrial centre and more recently the heart of the country's engineering sector. The wartime blitz of the city and the damage caused is shown. The narrator stresses that although the city has suffered a terrible blow, its spirit never died. On the way from the station Wilf and his girlfriend Betty, walk through the bomb damaged streets of the city visiting the shell of the cathedral, as they chat about their plans for the future, a home, a car and children. Back at home where Betty is staying with Wilf's parents, he tells of his plans to stay in Coventry after the war, provided he gets a job. The engineer and munitions girl are settling in at the hostel, which is shown to be a friendly and communal place. While the girl joins in some dancing the engineer sits down with a group of middle-aged men playing chess and chatting in a discussion group (an Engineering Club). The men are

⁴¹ *A City Reborn* (1945), sp: MOI, pc: Gryphon & Verity, pr: Donald Taylor, dir: John Eldridge, sc: Dylan Thomas, 23 mins.

impressed with the hostel, seeing it as an illustration of one of the benefits of a utilitarian approach to running society engendered by war. One man remarks: 'They've got the proper idea in these places. Makes you think what a hell of a lot we could produce when it's for use and not for sale'. The narrator then refers to the massive destruction of the city and the council's plans to build for the future so that the people have a city 'worthy of their courage'.

The camera cuts to the factory where Betty, the girl from the train and Mr. Evans are working. The girl is seen to be quickly adapting to her new surroundings. During a lunch break Betty and another girl chat about the boredom of factory work, film stars, and their hopes for marriage, a home and family after the war. They look on as a group of men begin to assemble a pre-fab house. In a pub Wilf, and an older builder or engineer, and a sceptical man argue the merits of pre-fab housing. The narrator explains that a massive reconstruction programme is planned after the war, not just to rebuild the bombed houses, but to build new, better planned cities. He states that the planners are resolved not to return 'to the good old days of cramped houses and crippling streets, of slums still living in a lingering death from the last century'. Factory built houses will help to solve a housing shortage until sufficient resources are amassed for the construction of brick homes. Back in the pub the old builder defends the pre-fab, which he prefers to call a 'factory made house'. Not only are they a practical solution and easy to build, but they incorporate many excellent design features and modern internal fittings. He concludes that they are far superior to the 'jerry-built' brick slum he lives in. The man at the bar is unconvinced, describing the pre-fabs as 'chicken coops', 'mechanised soap boxes' and 'skin houses'. The pre-fab advocate draws a diagram to

support his case. This discussion attracts other characters including a service woman interested in the design of the kitchens.

The narrator talks optimistically of the council's plans to rebuild the city for homes and jobs. It is explained that Coventry is one of the first British towns to prepare a plan, and that the planners are committed to the people's needs. The 'planners believe that this city only exists for the use of people'. Back at the hotel Evans expresses his pleasure at finding an 'Engineering Club', where he can discuss things and have 'a bit of an argument'. The main topic of conversation is the city's reconstruction plan, which is also one of Evans's interests. The details of the plan are outlined enthusiastically by Arthur, who is apparently directly involved with the plan. He explains the overall scheme, the ring road, an ambitious civic town centre with new public buildings, the position of the cathedral as the focal point for the layout of the city, a shopping arcade, the various public amenities proposed (a health centre, comprehensive school etc.) as well as the plans to build 20,000 council houses, fully equipped with radios, vacuum cleaners and washing machines. Thomas Sharp's model of the proposed plan is used to illustrate his description. Wilf and Betty are shown examining the model. As the couple walk to the railway station through the bomb-damaged streets, the commentary reaffirms the ethos behind the plan and the post-war society. As the train departs the couple make promises for the domestic bliss they are to enjoy after the war.

Although very few production records exist for the film, one can discern a number of propaganda messages, which are in some cases contradictory. Reflecting the original aims suggested at the MOI Production Conference in December 1942, there is a

great effort to show that Britain's blitzed towns and cities will be re-built and that the people's aspirations for homes and jobs will be addressed: significantly the film's working title was *Building for the Future*.⁴² Moreover, it is made clear that the state fully appreciates the great sacrifices that the people have made in the fighting forces and on the Home Front and that these sacrifices will be rewarded. It is also acknowledged that the people want more than just a house: they expect labour saving devices for the home, consumer goods, a car and, most important of all, the men returning from the forces expect a job.

No doubt reflecting more practical and immediate government concerns, the merits of the pre-fab house and the workers hostel are promoted in various ways throughout the film. *A City Reborn* also promoted the reconstruction plans for Coventry; in fact the guidance of the council is acknowledged in the credits. Perhaps reflecting this contribution, at one point Arthur, the 'planner', assures the others that the government will help to pay the £20 million bill for the plan; after all 'this is a national responsibility, not only a local one'. Ironically this version of Donald Gibson's plan, promoted so enthusiastically in the film, no longer had the support of the MOTCP and was opposed by some sections of the townsfolk, notably the Chamber of Commerce.⁴³ In discussions at the Ministry before the 'Coventry of the Future' exhibition, civil servants advised the Minister, Lewis Silkin, who was to open the event, to 'soft-pedal' the 'bold planning'

⁴² It was suggested that a film about Coventry be made 'to create hope for the future and confidence in our post-war planning powers'. Minutes of the MOI Film Production Conference, 22 December 1942, Forman Papers.

⁴³ The battle for the realisation of the Gibson plan, which had been largely prepared before the war, is covered in Tony Mason and Nick Tiratsoo, 'People, Politics and Planning: the Reconstruction of Coventry's City Centre, 1940-53', in Jeffrey M. Diefendorf (ed.), *Rebuilding Europe's Bombed Cities*, (1990), pp. 94-113.

idea, picking out exactly those features (the pedestrianised shopping arcade and large area of civic building) described in the film.⁴⁴ As most of the council was committed to Gibson's plan it is possible that the film was regarded as part of the strategy to overcome the opposition of the Ministry.⁴⁵

Finally, there is an idealistic and left-wing flavour to some of the script, particularly the observations on the communal nature of the hostel and the language used to describe the wider context of the city and society's reconstruction. No doubt these reflect the socialist sympathies of the film-makers Donald Taylor, John Eldridge and especially the script-writer Dylan Thomas, who as we have seen gave an emotional and political 'edge' to his writing.⁴⁶ Formerly as members of Strand, Taylor, Thomas and Eldridge had worked on films such as *Post 23*, *Wales Green Mountain Black Mountain* and *New Towns For Old*, which as we have seen espoused a similar philosophy.⁴⁷ When the men in the Engineering Club remark approvingly of the moral and practical advantages of 'use value' in society they are making a veiled reference to socialist principles. While the value of the hostel itself goes beyond providing a secure and friendly environment for the homeless and munitions workers in an unfamiliar town. The film-makers suggest that those who stay in the hostel are discovering a more communal form of life which has no connection to place and the class structure of the pre-war years. A society where, as demonstrated by the Engineering Club, the people are open-minded and interested in political and intellectual debate.

⁴⁴ PRO HLG 79/127 Coventry Exhibition. Letter from Mr. Hill, Regional planning Officer (MOTCP), Birmingham to Miss A.M.Jenkins (MOTCP), London, 1 October 1945.

⁴⁵ Mason and Tiratsoo, 'People and Politics', p 102.

⁴⁶ John Ackerman, *Filmscripts*, p. xii.

⁴⁷ Donald Taylor had closed Strand at the end of 1943 and set up a new company Gryphon.

The process of planning presented in the film is open, informal and fully involves the people. No doubt it was hoped that the scenes in the pub and the hostel in which Coventry's plans are discussed, would provoke similar discussions among the people. A key phrase used in the film is that Coventry has a 'people's plan'. This implied a democratic approach to planning as well as a plan that delivers the urban environment and amenities that the people want.

One should be cautious about overstating the radical nature of the film because, as we have seen in chapter two, left-wing film-makers were constrained by the context in which they worked. For example during the making of this film there was an intervention by the MOI's Director General to remove some 'portions of the film which had the appearance of political propaganda'.⁴⁸ It is likely that it was the film-makers socialist references that proved objectionable. Perhaps as a result of this intervention the film's message for the future is idealistic rather than openly socialist. Moreover, given the constant references to the suffering and sacrifice of the people, the script's demand for just rewards seem incontestable, even un-political. The commentator's final rousing words about the reconstruction of Coventry and Britain are idealistic, and to some could be interpreted as socialist, but in the overall context of the script (and the suffering endured by the people) are a perfectly justifiable manifesto for the future:

Coventry is going to be a place to live in
where people can believe that human life
can be good and pleasant. In the days to
come we must feel that it is not every
man for himself, but every man for the
good and the happiness of all people

⁴⁸ PRO INF 6/616 File of *A City Reborn*.

living. Every man must believe in the
good and happiness that is to be shared..
to be shared equally.

The film-makers suggest that the hostels were at the forefront of a social transformation towards a lifestyle which was communal and politically vibrant, where men ‘with bees in their bonnet’ sat around earnestly discussing the future while sucking on their pipes. While there is plenty of evidence of people having to live more communally and of greater interest in some political issues such as post-war reconstruction, it is doubtful that these trends were widespread or profound. Contemporary surveys of public opinion showed that most people did not desire to live communally nor were they enthused by socialism.⁴⁹ The aspirations of most ordinary people were far more mundane, practical and even materialistic.⁵⁰ In fact, they behaved much more like the couple featured in the film who want nothing more after the war than their ‘own little home, with a nice little garage, and a nice little nursery’.

The rest of the chapter will draw out those shared elements in the film presentation of the planning process.

Housing and planning films of the inter-war years tended to portray people who lived in slum housing as rather submissive figures, particularly concentrating on those most vulnerable to poor housing conditions-women and children. When this footage was incorporated in wartime films such as *Dawn Guard* and *Wales Green Mountain, Black*

⁴⁹ See Tony Mason and Peter Thompson, ‘The Political Mood in Wartime Britain’, in Nick Tiratsoo (ed.) *The Attlee Years*, (1991), particularly pp. 58-59.

⁵⁰ Nick Tiratsoo has remarked on the revival of consumerism and a ‘vibrant popular’ culture among Coventrians at the end of the war and in the post-war years in *Reconstruction, Affluence and Labour Politics: Coventry 1945-1960*, (1990), pp. 47-50.

Mountain, it is striking by comparison how much more powerful is the portrayal of the characters from the period of the war. They take a central role to discuss and evaluate their lives and the state of society, and they display a steely determination to improve their own lives through environmental change. In *New Towns for Old* the 'progress man' is a committed working-class councillor who has been elected by and from the ranks of 'Smokedale's' poorly housed, to rebuild the city on more human lives. In *A City Reborn* the engineer who speaks so enthusiastically and knowledgeably about the pre-fab is himself a man who lives in a slum. Wartime films on the built environment also began to address wider audiences and concerns. *New Towns For Old* refers to national reconstruction, the 'rebuilding of all our towns', an ambitious idea far beyond the parochial and local redevelopment programmes discussed in *Kensington Calling* (1929) or even *The Londoners* (1939). As the war progressed, films increasingly addressed adults particularly women and servicemen. In *A City Reborn* the key figures are the soldier and his fiancée and the engineer working in the factory.

Reconstruction is no longer just an issue of concern for the working-class, it is shown to be important to all of the community. For example during the making of *Development of the English Town*, Bossom and Kearney's suggestions to Mary Field for characters to articulate their requirements for a new town, included an RAF pilot and a factory worker. At the beginning of the ABCA film, *Town and Country Planning*, a wide range of people are consulted about what they would desire in a new town, this includes a train driver, a young office worker, a postman, and a man driving a Bentley. *New Towns For Old* even seems to have a place in the redeveloped cities for the Conservative 'why bother man'. Similarly in *A City Reborn* there is room for all types, not just the

politically committed characters arguing in the hostel about the new socialist world, but also the soldier and his girlfriend with their prosaic and individualistic aspirations for a home with a nursery and a garage.

Politically the people now have a pivotal role in changing their environment. They are no longer just frustrated slum dwellers waiting for a charity or local government body to deliver them from the slums. This point is especially noticeable in the (sadly now lost) *The Plan and the People* (1945) which was made to complement *Proud City* by presenting the 'human aspects' of the plan.⁵¹ The film featured two men, one from London (Alfie) and one from the west country, on 48 hours' leave. They spend their break at Alfie's home, in a friendly working-class community in Islington. The film's action moves between discussions in the Council chambers, where the councillors are trying to work out how they should rebuild the blitzed neighbourhood, and scenes back at Alfie's, where the men are forced to share a room to make way for a bombed-out neighbour. The film stresses the community feeling in the area, just the kind of situation that the L.C.C. plan hoped to retain. In the council chamber, it is decided that the district should be retained in its present form, although one councillor argues for it to be demolished in favour of new development. After a party the men from the forces discuss their future. A sailor, who has been at the party, explains that foreign travel has made him aware of the greater opportunities and egalitarianism found in places like Canada, and he feels that London has little to offer his new family. Alfie, on the other hand, says the war has made him appreciate the community spirit of London, his mates, the 'good

⁵¹ *The Plan and the People* (1945), pc: Realist, pr: John Taylor, dir: Frank Sainsbury, ph: A.E.Jenkins, cast: Alfred Bass, Neville Mapp, 19 mins.

old London, the old fish and chip shop, the old pub and a game of darts'. Back in the council chamber, the councillors debate finance for the plans they want to implement and the film ends with a wedding party, at which Alfie is pushing the councillors to make sure they build enough homes. One councillor replies that it is the demobbed soldiers who should be dictating, and using the local government elections to get their own way.

The whole point is, you're the people who
should be giving us orders - you're the
public - if you'll take a bit of interest,
find out what's going on, make your
decision and then tell us to get on with
it, we'll get the job done soon enough.
But if you leave it to somebody else, well
you've only yourself to blame.

This was a recurring theme in official films. As we have seen, this was a key element in *The People and the Plan*. *Proud City* (1945) however, takes the most traditional and arguably the least democratic way of presenting planning.⁵² The chief figures in the film are not the people, but the main creators of the County of London Plan Abercrombie, Forshaw and Ling. In an approach similar to the GPO film *The City* (1939) about Sir Charles Bressey's ideas for the redevelopment of London, the three men explain the ideas behind their plan from their grand office in a style akin to a lecture.⁵³ From this opening lecture, the camera moves out into London's unplanned mixture of beautiful and ugly building, as the film relates the main themes of the plan. One of the key ideas they try to get across is that they want to retain London's village community in

⁵² *Proud City* (1945), sp: MOI, pc: Green Park, writer & dir: Ralph Keene, ph: Peter Henessey, assoc. pr: Edgar Anstey, 26 mins.

⁵³ A review of *The City* (1939) in the *Architects Journal* (9 November 1939) underlined the patronising tone adopted: 'We were shown the growth of London, the mess and what Londoners' suffer from it. And then Sir Charles Bressey (with the air of the nicest possible kind of Lion being gentle with the children) explained the Bressey report with the extraordinary clearness which films make possible'.

the new plan.⁵⁴ Other elements such as a scene at County Hall of planners and architects working away at drawings of the new city, presents an image of the technocrat delivering a new city to us. Some reviewers objected to this approach and considered the film boring and priggish, as one commented: 'Distinguished gentlemen lean over pompous desks and discourse to us about fresh air and hygiene'.⁵⁵ Another reviewer was even more cynical: 'the wider streets which are proposed seem to leave out the desires of the individual except in so far as everyone would rather have more air and less smoke'.⁵⁶ However, one should not overlook another aspect of the film, the attempt to elicit Londoners' responses and opinions. At the beginning of the film we hear Londoners' questioning the state of the pre-war city- 'must we always have slums?', one asks. This allows the narrator to make the familiar comment that 'war was seen as an opportunity to re-order London', and that the planning started in 1941. But the commentary adds that the L.C.C. had conducted a large survey in order to find out what the people wanted. At the end of the film the leader of the L.C.C., Lord Latham, talks to camera about the challenge of the plan and that he wants to know what Londoners think of it. A dialogue then begins involving various Londoners. A housewife asks Latham if she will have to move, a boy asks about football pitches, and a typist enquires how much the work will cost. In a concluding exchange with a cabbie Latham stresses that the County of London Plan would come to nought without public support:

Taxi Driver: That's all right, but we've heard
these grand sort of ideas before [i.e. the
reconstruction of London]Nothing was ever

⁵⁴ This meant planning to retain and emphasise the distinctive local character of the former villages from which the city had grown: 'It should be one of the first objectives of the planner to disengage these communities, to mark more clearly their identities, to preserve them from disturbing intrusions such as streams of through traffic and generally to reconstruct them where reconstruction is necessary due to war damage or decay', J.H.Forshaw and Patrick Abercrombie, The County of London Plan, (1943), pp.2-3.

⁵⁵ The Sunday Graphic, 9 November 1945.

⁵⁶ The Times 8 November 1945.

done then, and I don't suppose it will be now...Latham: Well, the only answer I can give to that is that it's up to all of us. If we want this plan or anything like it, then we must go on pressing for it until we get it...The people of London must support the plan so that we at the L.C.C. will be given even greater powers....

At the end of *New Towns For Old* a similar plea is made. As the men in the action turn to the camera one comments: 'Yes, you've got plans for your town all right, but who's going to see that they don't stay just plans, who's going to make the dream come true?' The Yorkshireman points with his pipe at us. 'They are. You're the only folk that can make this plan come true. Not only plans for this town but for every town. For your town!' The camera closes in shot by shot on the man's face looking at the camera. The final shot is of his hand holding the pipe pointing through the smoke as a train whistle blows in the background. On the soundtrack the voice says: 'Remember it's your town'.

Many of the films chose to create a debate within the film so that new aspects of reconstruction could be aired. In *New Towns For Old* the discussion is basically about the need for urban redevelopment, but in *A City Reborn* the argument has moved on to look at aspects of the plans and new elements such as the pre-fab. One of the most significant characteristics of these two films is that the discussion occurs between ordinary people. By contrast in *The City* (1939), the dialogue is between an unseen character (the cabby) and the planner, Sir Charles Bressey. Some of the wartime films such as *Proud City* and the *Worker and Warfront* newsreel (about the reconstruction of

Bermondsey) did take a more formal approach in which the commentary tells the audience about proposed changes. *The Development of The English Town* can also be placed in this group as it treats the audience to a history lecture on town planning.

Although this authoritative element exists, it is clear that in most cases the films were endeavouring to encourage the involvement of the people in the creation of the plans. In *Housing in Scotland* and *Town and Country Planning* the people in the film are consulted about the kind of urban redevelopment they desire. In *Housing in Scotland* which looks at the country's immense housing problem and the plans to tackle this after the war, the film includes a dramatised scene in a pub where Scottish servicemen and women are filling out questionnaires sent out by the Scottish Housing Advisory Committee 'to try to find out what you people want'. The rest of the action involves a housing 'expert' showing a housewife and a soldier around a temporary house to illustrate how they have tried to match the house to the desires suggested by the people in the questionnaire. The approach of these films encourages a dialogue with the audience. Whether the characters debated the issues of reconstruction with each other as in *A City Reborn* or addressed the audience, the film-makers' intentions were similar.

Few production records exist for these films but there are records relating to the exhibitions of the plans. These suggest that the films' role paralleled that of the exhibition's displays and particularly the ubiquitous scale models. Discussions at Coventry and London stressed that the purpose of these displays was not to show local governments' final plans for reconstruction but 'to foster public interest, and possibly to

excite useful criticism and suggestions'.⁵⁷ Therefore, exhibitions were 'to aim at being comprehensible to the man in the street, while preserving the serious purpose of the plan'.⁵⁸

For local authorities, unsure of the amount of financial support that central government would provide for their plans, and often still involved in fierce battles over planning proposals, such an open policy was naturally a prudent strategy. However, it seems that local government was sincere in its intention to encourage a dialogue with local people, and that film was seen as a useful tool to encourage such involvement. Lord Latham, in a film often criticised for its pedagogic portrayal of planning, invited the film's audience to comment on the proposals for London's reconstruction:

Latham: And that's all it will be (a dream)
unless Londoners make up their minds that it
shall be more than a dream. That's why we must
all think about this plan and discuss it among
yourselves, and you can let the L.C.C. know any
ideas you have about it.

Discussions at the L.C.C. for the exhibition of the County of London Plan underlined the sentiments in the film.⁵⁹ T.G. Randall, who was co-ordinating the publicity for the exhibition, explained:

The Plan is not cut and dried, and makes no
claim to be final. The aim of its publication
and of the exhibition is to collect from
experts, technicians and the general public, a
mass of opinions and informed criticism. The
people most concerned with the new London are

⁵⁷ PRO HLG 79/127 Frederick Smith, Coventry Town Clerk to A.R. Wagner Private Secretary to Minister of Town and Country Planning.

⁵⁸ PRO HLG 52/1180 Minutes of meeting between MOI and MOTCP on the Greater London Plan exhibition 16 February 1945.

⁵⁹ PRO HLG 52/1180 Greater London Plan Exhibition. Between 14 August 1945 and 25 September 1945 76,390 people visited the exhibition.

the Londoners who will live in it. Public opinion like the plan itself, will form part of the raw material from which the County Council will hammer out its planning policy.⁶⁰

Conclusion

One of the striking contrasts between films of the inter-war years and those discussed in this chapter, is that film-makers came to place the public at the centre of discussions about reconstruction. In the earlier housing films the 'people' were observed or at best allowed to comment on their immediate environment, rather than look forward or take part in preparing or discussing their future homes. This was a reflection of pre-war slum clearance schemes where there was very little consultation with slum-dwellers or survey work to establish the kind of houses they would like to move into.⁶¹ But how effective were wartime films in achieving their producers' aims? As was discussed in the previous chapter, different groups often had different aims for films. First, the film-makers and producers undoubtedly responded to the requests of many in the planning and architectural movement to produce films that addressed problems of reconstruction. For example the Workers Film Association Advisory Committee had suggested to the L.C.C. that a film on the County of London Plan 'would be of great interest'.⁶² It is unlikely that the L.C.C. decided to commission *Proud City* and *The Plan and the People* solely on the basis of this request, but it indicates a likely wider demand to which MOI films' policy was sensitive. Second, film appraisers at RIBA were generally appreciative

⁶⁰ Greater London Record Office CL/TP/1/41 T.G. Randall of L.C.C. Clerks Dept. Co-ordinator of all publicity and printing for the exhibition of the County of London Plan, 26 April 1943. In a radio broadcast on 13 July 1943, explaining the plan Lord Latham told Londoners that the final plan would not be prepared until the views of the people and local authorities had been considered. Therefore he invited them to think about and give their comments on the plan, and not necessarily only positive ones. National Sound Archives, catalogue no. AA 5928-9.

⁶¹ Norman Dennis, *People and Planning*. (1970), p. 156.

⁶² Workers Film Association, Minutes of the Sixth Meeting of the Advisory Council, 1 November 1943, HD9999CS, TUC Archive.

of government films, particularly those that were more didactic such as *Town and Country Planning* (1944) and *Architects of England* (1941). In a number of cases RIBA fellows and other independent experts even advised on these productions.

Films also addressed those civil servants who wanted to impress Americans, and other allies or neutrals, that Britain was a progressive society. *New Towns For Old* was included with a group of the government's most radical films, in a section entitled 'Britain Plans', in a booklet sent overseas called Films of Britain at War. It described *New Towns For Old* as telling 'of the need for intelligent town planning and adequate housing after the war - a subject of vital interest to the people of the bombed cities of England....Such films as these are being given wide distribution and are stimulating further thought and discussion of the important problems involved.'⁶³

But how effective these films were in encouraging debate and informing ordinary people of the range of possibilities open to British planners and politicians is not easy to assess. In most cases we only have the unsystematic and un-corroborated opinions of individuals. For example, according to Rees Williams, Tottenham's surveyor, who ordered *Development of the English Town* for the Council's planning exhibition, this film 'was of considerable help in interesting the public in the subject of post-war planning'.⁶⁴ We do not know how he came to this conclusion, neither are there any other reports of the use of the film in Tottenham to substantiate his claims. However, we have slightly more substantial evidence about a *A City Reborn*, and other related titles, which played to

⁶³ Films of Britain at War : Some notes on how British Government films serve the war effort of the United Nations, (1945) held in the BFI Library. The other films in the 'Britain Plans' section were *World of Plenty*, *The Harvest Shall Come* and *ABCA*.

⁶⁴ PRO BW4/45 Rees Williams, Tottenham Surveyor to H.W. Todd (BC), 28 August 1945.

packed houses at the town planning exhibition in Coventry. This particular film, and the others in the programme, undoubtedly contributed to the acknowledged popular success of the exhibition as a whole, which in turn helped to generate enthusiastic support for Gibson's plan.⁶⁵ In the summer of 1946 observers considered that the size of this support had resulted in a remarkably small number of objections being raised against the plan during the public enquiry.⁶⁶

What one can say is that film producers made a sincere attempt to present the issues of reconstruction in a form that would be familiar to wartime audiences, and was more in tune with the usual cinema fare of feature films. One analysis of the reception of MOI films screened non-theatrically in the first five months of 1944 indicates that these efforts were successful:

Many of the reports commented on improvements of the programme....This appears to indicate that non-theatrical is becoming more and more sure of its ends. It also appears to indicate that we have gradually created a type of audience which knows what to expect and like what it gets.⁶⁷

This suggests that information about reconstruction was, by 1944, presented in a palatable form. However, such aggregated evidence is sometimes irrelevant when examining the impact of individual films. For all Rotha's high hopes for *Five and Under*, for example, its popular impact in Britain was limited because it was only distributed overseas. There were frequently widely different reactions to the same film. For example

⁶⁵ Tiratsoo, *Reconstruction*, p.16.

⁶⁶ Tiratsoo, *Reconstruction*, p. 32-33.

⁶⁷ 'Report on the Reception of Films Used Non-Theatrically, January to May 1944', Helen Forman Papers.

RIBA film appraisers and the History Committee for the Monthly Film Bulletin liked the *Architects of England*.⁶⁸ By contrast, reviewers in the Documentary Newsletter thought that its survey of architectural styles and building methods was superficial because it failed to deal with the concept that 'architecture is entirely and absolutely an aspect of sociology', and that consequently a film on this 'topic should be firmly rooted in the contemporary life of the people'.⁶⁹ This divergence of opinion illustrates the difficulty of assessing the impact and value of a film on a range of individuals and groups. Reports of *Dawn Guard*, one of the few films in this chapter to be well supported with contemporary comment, are just as divided. The Documentary Newsletter gave the film a place on the front page when it was released and congratulated the MOI for its style and in coming

very near to expressing the feelings of ordinary people as regards what sort of future is to come out of the war....*Dawn Guard* is good propaganda not merely because it is right in policy, but also because it focuses the desires, so often vague and unformulated, of ordinary people.⁷⁰

However, in a report on the reception of MOI non-theatrical films in Scotland, the mobile projectionist found that this film's intentions were misunderstood, and as a result it created hostility:

A film like *Dawn Guard* leaves them with the idea that someone is trying to put something over on them. The dialogue in the film - "The truth is we are much too lazy. We left it to other people to think instead of thinking for ourselves"- seems to them a very insincere criticism coming from a government film.⁷¹

⁶⁸ 'Review of Films', RIBA Journal, May 1948 & Monthly Film Bulletin, March 1944.

⁶⁹ Documentary Newsletter, February 1941.

⁷⁰ Documentary Newsletter, February 1941.

One diarist found nothing startling about *Dawn Guard*, and only one theme seems to have made an impact: 'A philosophical dialogue on the (obvious) merits of retaining the neighbourly spirit after the war'.⁷² However, some commentators of the time regarded this as vital to ensure lasting peace and the reconstruction of a socialist society. Stephen Spender believed that the citizenship and neighbourliness associated with the Civil Defence movement would produce a better society by ensuring closer contact and co-operation between the classes and those in power and the 'people'. For example the relationship 'between the planner to the people for whom towns are planned should be co-operative, not that of the beast of prey to the unfortunate victim who has to live in a prefabricated rabbit hutch.' He even suggested that Civil Defence Clubs would be an ideal place where 'the local planners might here meet the people whose environment they are planning.'⁷³

Some films failed as propaganda. *Proud City* was generally criticised for being overly pedagogic. If that was the reaction of the critics it is quite likely that many audiences were alienated by it, even though its intentions were populist. Such 'failures' may be because the planning theorists' worthy intentions to explain and present their ideas took precedence over propaganda technique. In the early years of the war, Rotha and others had argued that in order to create effective reconstruction propaganda, technicians and experts had to be brought together with publicists to articulate their ideas in a popular form. The next chapter will look at how independently produced films of

⁷¹ Documentary Newsletter, July 1941.

⁷² P.B. Ewing, diary, 23 January 1941, held at the Cinema Museum, London.

⁷³ Stephen Spender, Citizens In War-And After, (1945), p. 110.

the same period addressed the problems of reconstruction and attempt an assessment of how successful they were as propaganda.

Chapter Four: Independent Films on Housing and Planning, 1939-1946.

During the war eleven non-fiction films on reconstruction were produced independently of the government.¹ Another six to ten feature films touched on the subject. The four commercial newsreel companies included related items in many issues: Pathe alone covered housing or planning in eleven issues between September 1939 and November 1945. This chapter will concentrate on the most important of the independent documentaries: *When We Build Again* (1943), *Homes for the People* (1945), *The Way We Live* (1946) and *Land of Promise* (1946). It will begin by explaining why and how independent housing and planning organisations and commercial companies collaborated to produce these films. It will then discuss the production, distribution and the presentation of the imagery of housing and planning and assess how effectively these films fulfilled the propaganda intentions of the film-makers and sponsors.

The initial difficulty of obtaining government sponsorship for films on the built environment led planning lobbyists and film-makers to seek commercial funding. Rotha thought it was most sensible to target those industries which would benefit from

¹ The Housing Centre produced two new films *Homes they Come From* and *Housing in Great Britain- An Introduction to Housing*, it also updated *Housing Progress* with *Rehousing in Britain* (1943); The St.Pancras Association updated and re-edited its films *Challenge: The War on Slums* (1941) and *War Over Somers Town*; The National Federation of Housing Societies produced *Housing Societies* (1940); the Health and Cleanliness Council's *Forward March* (1942), was made by Visonoor Films and sponsored by the electricity industry ; *The Road Ahead* (1945), whose sponsor is unknown, is a silent film advocating the reconstruction of Britain which includes long sections from *When We Build Again*. *The Ten Year Plan* (1945), pc: GB Instructional, dir:Lewis Gilbert, is a commercially sponsored film starring Charles Hawtrey promoting a particular make of pre-fab home. Possibly sponsored by the Iron and Steel Industry.

reconstruction, such as steel, plastics, timber, light alloys, gas, and electricity;² a shrewd observation as such companies made every attempt to ally themselves with post-war reconstruction. The Architects Journal includes many advertisements in which a company's product was seen in the context of major building projects. Before the war advertisements for building materials were slanted towards the work of slum clearance, but from 1941 they drew on the discussions about reconstruction. Companies like Bryce White (which made internal house fittings) Royal Doulton and Vectair Heating wrote portentous copy about their willingness to help with the crusade to build a better Britain after the war. Even the humble water closet and bath had a role to play in the new world. Royal Doulton offered this commentary on the 'New Jerusalem' debates:

The time, we believe, is no longer far distant when we shall be able to turn all our energies to realising the plan now being formulated for a better Britain - better educated, better fed, better housed. In the post-war reconstruction, rebuilding will take a foremost place; and in this rebuilding ceramic wares of many different types will be required.

Well-designed and adequate sanitary fittings will undoubtedly be insisted upon. The days are gone for ever, we hope, when well-planned bathrooms and labour saving kitchens were the privilege of those fortunate individuals whose incomes exceeded a certain level.....³

Commercial sponsorship of films for the government and independent campaigning organisations reached a peak during the war with companies such as ICI and

² Paul Rotha, diary, 18 August 1941, p. 74, Book 1, Folder 16, Box 23, Rotha Collection 2001, URL Special Collections, UCLA.

³ Architects Journal, 15 July 1943.

Cadbury, as well as steel, gas and electricity companies keen to fund propaganda and information films on a range of topics. Perhaps this should come as no surprise. At the beginning of the war, and to a lesser extent throughout the conflict, access to commercial advertising space in the press was reduced. Therefore film distribution via non-theatrical screenings was vital, as a writer in the Gas Salesman put it, to 'keep the use of Gas in the public mind'.⁴ Moreover, the expansion of non-theatrical audiences with the creation of the MOI film service and similar schemes run by ENSA and the Ministry of Supply, enabled a sponsored film made on behalf of the government to reach far bigger audiences than had been possible before the war. A writer in Gas Salesman observed that by making films for the government, which were then included in ministry film programmes, it was possible to reach double the usual audience (i.e. two million).⁵ This distribution was also free, the only cost to the sponsor being a film's initial production costs.

Another reason for sponsoring government films was that the Government's own propaganda work in the cinemas had reduced the time available for advertisements. In order to ensure that commercials were not screened instead of government official films, the Board of Trade introduced a ruling which prevented cinema exhibitors from 'showing advertisement film in preference to any film freely distributed under the auspices of the MOI.'⁶ Thus films such as the ICI's *The Harvest Shall Come* (1943) or

⁴ The Gas Salesman, August 1950.

⁵ The Gas Salesman, 1941, p. 97.

⁶ Wartime Trading Bulletin, October 1942, p. 1013.

Cadbury's *Bringing It Home* (1940) ensured that a company's name still reached the screen.

By March 1945, the demand for films by government departments, the Services and for export had led to a cut of one sixth in the supply of raw film stock to commercial producers.⁷ This inevitably affected the production of advertisements; in fact so concerned was the state to ensure the uninterrupted production of its films, that it even considered prohibiting the production of all advertising films. The Board of Trade only relented when the companies concerned agreed not to make commercials unless they could be certain that the work would not interfere with execution of contracts placed by government departments.⁸

In these circumstances companies which had traditionally cultivated an association with the housing and planning movement were pro-active in offering assistance, particularly if it might raise their profile. The TCPA especially benefited from help provided by Cadbury via the Bournville Village Trust. In December 1942 Paul Redmayne, the Trust's advertising manager, joined the TCPA's Propaganda Advisory Committee,⁹ as a result of which Cadbury negotiated a joint publishing arrangement with

⁷ Wartime Trading Bulletin, March 6, House of Commons, quoted in the Wartime Trading Bulletin, Vol. VII, 1945, p. 379.

⁸ Wartime Trading Bulletin, October 1942, p. 1013.

⁹ Minutes of the Town and Country Planning Association's Executive Committee, 12 March 1942. Town and Country Planning Association archives.

the TCPA to produce, at no cost to the Association, ‘pictorial publicity’.¹⁰ In December 1942 it was announced that Redmayne and Gilbert McAllister were collaborating on a film based on the Bournville Village Trust’s 1941 book When We Build Again.¹¹ As has been mentioned in chapter two, McAllister had been looking for sponsorship for a planning film for the cinema since he had joined the Ministry of Works and Building. It is unclear whether Cadbury was the first company he approached, but it is likely that discussions began as early as August 1941. Although no production records have been found, we know that there was some government involvement in the production. In fact between October 1941 and April 1942, the producers had been in consultation with PR officers at the Ministry of Works over the film.¹²

When We Build Again (1943)¹³

When We Build Again opens with a dramatised sequence of three soldiers going home for seven days’ leave. In the train they discuss the slum housing they can see from the windows. One soldier’s mother lives in such a home but is reluctant to leave. An examination of Britain’s slums follows accompanied by a bitter commentary by Dylan Thomas: ‘A wealthy country - and the slums. All the millions of money, and all the millions of your countrymen that still live like this’. We are shown various shots of slum conditions, outside toilets and poor access to water, houses abutting onto factories and

¹⁰ Minutes of the TCPA Executive Committee, 8 May 1942, Town and Country Planning Association archives.

¹¹ Minutes of the TCPA Executive Committee, 31 December 1942, TCPA archives.

¹² PRO HLG 71/1253 Public Relations Work in the Planning Department.

¹³ *When We Build Again* (1943), sp: Cadbury Bros., pc: Strand, dir: Ralph Bond, ph: Charles Marlborough, 25mins.

industry: 'Every morning they wake to see the unpitying, unvarying landscape of the slums'.

Back in the train a second soldier describes his house, in a pleasant terrace, but he bemoans his children's lack of play-space and the proximity of his house to an industrial area. The narration resumes over a survey of the unplanned suburban sprawl and ribbon development of the inter-war years 'only the shopping centres seem alive....'. The third soldier is followed to his home, located in a pleasant estate on the outskirts of a town, as the commentary remarks a place 'where a man may be proud of his own place and of his own city'. There follows a doorstep survey of people who are living on a new estate and those still in slum homes which provokes a mixed response while for example the new estate is praised bringing improved health to the family of one satisfied tenant, another complains that though he likes the house, it is over a mile from the pub. Similarly a couple interviewed outside a slum, express a keen desire to move to a modern house in another district, while an older woman says she is reluctant to move to a more expensive house. Finally, focusing on the findings of the Bournville survey, the film recommends slum clearance and re-planning of the existing city, the creation of open spaces and other amenities, and the zoning of factories.

It also argues that new satellite towns should be surrounded by green belts. The salient features of such a town such are demonstrated with the aid of a model made by Thomas Sharp, and a chart. Householders are again interviewed and the film ends with a

discussion of the many facilities that will be needed such as communal restaurants, nurseries and medical centres.

Here are the people we must build and plan for,
we must plan as a nation and not allow
private interest to stand in the way. There must
be no uncontrolled building - no more ugly houses
and dangerous roads. No more stinting of effort
when we build again. Nothing is too good for
people. The people are the greatest capital a
country possess, they are its courage and its
strength and the future will belong to them.

When We Build Again was welcomed by the planning movement, and it quickly became a favourite at film shows on reconstruction, and augmented various town-planning displays. This was exactly what had been intended by P.S.Cadbury, who had sponsored it, explaining at the premiere that he 'was keen that the film should assist in reaching a larger public than had been possible with the book'.¹⁴

The Bournville Trust's survey began in 1935, involved interviewing 7000 people and set out to discover what sort of city and homes people wanted to live in. The Bournville Works Magazine explained the thinking behind the Trust's research:

It is a question of what people do want rather than what they ought to want which is so often ignored by the experts. We are glad when an enlightened architect plans a working-class suburb with the amenities hitherto regarded as the privilege of the well-to-do. We can understand the social reformer welcoming the idea. But has either of them necessarily paid sufficient regard to how much it costs the wage-earner to get to and from his work?¹⁵

¹⁴ Municipal Journal, 5 March 1943.

¹⁵ Bournville Works Magazine, November 1941, p. 258.

Given this background, it is not surprising that the film includes interviews with householders and stresses that we must respond to what the people want. At its premiere P.S.Cadbury, said that the country could only be re-planned if there was a comprehensive programme to 'ascertain the facts and make plans that are based on facts and not on prejudice' and to 'educate and interest public opinion in the need for drastic action'.¹⁶

When We Build Again was widely welcomed on its release in February 1943, particularly by the planning press. Most were in agreement with the Town and Country Planning journal that it was a 'tremendous step forward in town planning education' and 'The first film in Britain to present some of the basic issues of town planning to the public'.¹⁷ The film's wide acceptance was partly due to the fact that it did not try to promote the garden city argument, exploring both the imaginative architectural planning solutions to redeveloping existing towns and the creation of new towns in rural areas.¹⁸ The interviews with 'typical dwellers in semi-slums' and rehoused tenants, were noted as particularly helpful. The News Chronicle's reviewer was struck by the direct involvement of: 'the worker, the house-wife, the slum-dweller, the flat dweller turn to the camera and give their very pertinent comments and suggestions'.¹⁹ This approach to presenting planning was welcomed by other documentary film makers, the Documentary Newsletter decided this aspect had rescued it despite 'faults and its rather unwieldy shape':

¹⁶ Architects Journal, 11 March 1943, p. 179.

¹⁷ Town and Country Planning, 42 (1943), p. 72. A similar evaluation appeared in the Municipal Journal, 5 March 1943.

¹⁸ Architects Journal, 11 March 1943, p. 179.

¹⁹ News Chronicle, 24 February 1943.

For years we've had to listen to the middle-class technocrats, the Corbusiers, Gropiuses, Mendelsohns and Lloyd-Wrights of this world, telling us what they were going to give us to live in, and that we should be duly thankful. In a large number of cases their plans were based on nothing much more than some personal weakness of middle-class prejudice, the classic example being H.G.Wells, because he himself suffers from colds, planning for us all to live in air-conditioned towns under the ground. Well this film will have none of that nonsense: it goes firmly straight to the people who would have to live in those abortions and tries to find out what they think they want.²⁰

The film had wide distribution as a 16mm print on the MOI non-theatrical circuit, accompanying the TCPA exhibition of the same name, and in the cinemas.²¹

Because *When We Build Again* was funded and produced independently it was possible for the producers to explore the subject of reconstruction in detail and take a much more critical position than any of the MOI films yet produced. However, given the Ministry of Works involvement the film could be described as an unofficial government film, repeating arguments held by some civil servants which could not yet be publicised due to the wider political climate. As a result, although Dylan Thomas's script is sharp about the problems of Britain's cities, the proposals for the future show neither a partiality towards the garden city nor to urban regeneration, but instead present both as necessary.

²⁰ Documentary News Letter, February 1943, p. 182.

²¹ *When We Build Again* first appeared in the 1944 edition of the Central Film Library catalogue. It was not the only film with which the TCPA was involved. At the end of 1944 it was reported that a number of people had asked the Association for assistance with the preparation of planning films.

Between the release of *When We Build Again* in February 1943 and *Homes For the People* at the Labour Party conference in 1945, there was a hiatus in the release of independently sponsored films. State films took over the role of informing the public, but behind the scenes film-makers were pursuing long-term projects with commercial sponsors. Paul Rotha started negotiations with the gas industry as early as April 1942 on the possibility of a film on planning. In April 1944 at RIBA, the Films Sub-committee, which had fallen into abeyance at the outbreak of war, was reconvened with the role of advising on documentary films which looked at architecture.²²

In the independently-funded sector, the last eighteen months of the war were a high-point for the production and release of films, four being released between V.E. day and July 1946.²³ Some independent films (such as the *Ten Year Plan* (1945) promoting the pre-fab) paralleled the concerns of some of the government films, although in this case, the film's commercial motive to promote one particular make of home, tended to compromise its public service value. The major independent films were highly political, reflecting a growing anxiety that the idealistic promises and hopes for radical reconstruction, which had characterised discussions between 1941 and 1943, would not be realised.

²² Minutes of the Films, Broadcasting and T.V. Sub-Committee, meeting of 19 April 1944, 11.1.7, RIBA Archive.

²³ *Homes For the People* (1945), *The Ten Year Plan* (1945), *The Way We Live* (1946), *The Land of Promise* (1946).

When Jill Craigie began investigating her documentary-feature *The Way We Live* (1946), her interests in the subject were not directly political. As she recently explained, she was drawn to the topic of housing and planning for quite personal reason: ‘I was interested in the arts and home-making, I suppose not having a home, I was very interested in homes and the creation of homes’.²⁴ Thus when she asked the RIBA Films Sub-Committee in October 1944 to help her with the project, she stated that her aims were ‘to introduce in a non-technical way to the public, matters which they ought to understand regarding town-planning’.²⁵ As she researched the subject and came into contact with the town planners Sir Charles Reilly, Professor Patrick Abercrombie and Clough Williams-Ellis, her aims for the film became more sophisticated: ‘Suddenly I wanted to make my own film, I wanted to interpret what the artists and the town planners were saying to mass audiences’.²⁶

Craigie’s aims also became more political. The film is particularly interesting because of its acute observations about the popular mood between the end of the war and the general election. Craigie discerns that the people had become bored with reconstruction, even when the plans related to their own towns. This mood reflected a general apathy and a return to home centred concerns at the end of the war. More disheartening still, Craigie observed a return of the old class barriers. In the ARP post in

²⁴ Recorded interview with Jill Craigie, IWM Sound Archives, accession no. 14293/3, reel: 1

²⁵ Minutes of the Films, Broadcasting and TV Sub-Committee, meeting of 17 October 1944, 11.1.7, RIBA. The following people sat on this Sub-Committee: Basil R. Ward (Chair), Mark Abrams, Jack Beddington, Lt. R.Y. Goodden, Mrs. Jacquetta Hawkes, Paul Rotha, Ralph Tubbs, R.O. Vine (Hon. Sec.), Miss M.W. Bromley (Ass. Sec.).

²⁶ Craigie, 14293/3, reel: 1

Hampstead, where she had served through the war, she noticed that it happened practically overnight, with her upper and middle-class neighbours shunning the working-class air raid warden whom they had previously respected and deferred to as their natural leader.²⁷ Later, in the spring of 1947, Craigie saw a cultural manifestation of this return of the status quo²⁸: ‘I was very alarmed by the New Look, and the debutantes. This smacked to me of being difficult for socialists’.²⁹ By re-awakening what Craigie believed had been a widespread enthusiasm for radical reconstruction, once senses from her film and recollections, that she hoped the people might recapture the collective spirit of the war, a period about which she is still nostalgic: ‘Now the war suited me very well. Although it was horrific, it was very anti-materialistic, it was the nearest to a socialist society we’ve ever had’.³⁰

Jill Craigie had worked as a scriptwriter for the British Council before producing her first film *Out Of Chaos* (1944), about the work of British artists in the war. The critical success of *Out of Chaos* gave Craigie some influence with J.Arthur Rank, whom she approached with the idea of making a film with a ‘serious purpose’ to replace the American ‘B’ pictures which usually filled the second feature slot in cinema programmes.³¹ That Rank agreed to her idea surprised Craigie. The subject of the reconstruction of a city was not particularly cinematic and certainly ‘resolutely

²⁷ Craigie, 14923/3, reel: 2.

²⁸ Christian Dior’s first collection, which created the New Look, was revealed on 12 February 1947 and caused a sensation. It was a romantic and nostalgic style which was incredibly extravagant, some skirts used over twenty yards of cloth.

²⁹ Craigie, 14293/3, reel: 3

³⁰ Craigie, 14293/3, reel: 1

³¹ G.Macnab, *J.Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry*, (1993), p. 157.

downbeat'.³² Feature film producers had not dealt with this subject directly during the war, and, by the time Craigie was commissioned, there was a trend towards escapist films, melodramas and fantasies such as the (Rank owned) Gainsborough company's *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (1944), *The Wicked Lady* (1945) and *Caravan* (1945), all of which did well at the box office.³³ By 1944 even Michael Balcon at Ealing Studios, who had previously been committed to films set against a backdrop of contemporary British life, apparently conceded that the public was tiring of films about the war.³⁴ It was hard to imagine that a film about a city that had suffered particularly badly from the Blitz (30,000 people were made homeless) could succeed at the box office. John Davis, the chief accountant at Rank certainly thought so and did everything he could to prevent the film being produced.

To compound the obstacles to the film, Craigie was an inexperienced director and a woman. Although a number of women were able to make inroads into documentary production, so far they had rarely made the leap into the roles of producer or director of feature films.³⁵ Ironically, the patronising press interest in Craigie as an attractive woman film director worked in her favour in her battle to complete the film. At a crucial meeting with Rank and Davis, she showed Rank the film's pre-publicity to outmanoeuvre Davis, who argued that it was not commercial:

I had had an enormous amount of publicity just
because I was a woman.....all for the wrong

³² Macnab, *Rank*, p. 158.

³³ Robert Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel: Cinema and Society In Britain 1939-1949*, (1989), p. 44.

³⁴ Murphy, *Realism*, p. 41.

³⁵ Mary Field, Margaret Thomson, Kay Mander and Ruby Grierson all worked as directors in documentary.

reasons. “Although she’s in charge of forty men, she’s very feminine”- this sort of terrible stuff.³⁶

Moreover, Craigie wanted to make a film in a documentary style, using the people of Plymouth rather than actors. So far this had only been attempted in MOI or Army Film Unit productions, such as Humphrey Jennings’ *Fires Were Started* (1943); feature film-makers had never gone this far in adopting the ‘realist’ style. The fact that the capitalist J.Arthur Rank decided to back Craigie, Rank’s historian Macnab sees quite rightly as an indication of the man’s imagination and broadmindedness.³⁷ George Ivan Smith came to similar conclusions about him when he was producing the first two issues of Rank’s post-war newsreel *This Modern Age*; one which was about the housing situation (*Homes for All*, 1947) and the other about the coal industry.³⁸

³⁶ Jill Craigie, quoted in Macnab, *Rank*, p. 159. Most of the account of Craigie’s battle with Davis and Rank’s decision to back her film proposal is drawn from Macnab pp. 157-160.

³⁷ Macnab, *Rank*, p. 158.

³⁸ Recorded interview with George Ivan Smith (1915-) on 12 May 1995, BECTU oral history collection, reel 5 of 8. Smith is an Australian documentary film-maker who started his career working for ABC as an announcer and broadcaster. He came to work in England in 1940 and worked with the BBC Overseas Service. After the war he wrote to J.Arthur Rank suggesting a cinematic version of his radio features. He persuaded him of the need to make films about Britain in the post-war. Out of this came the Rank newsreel series, *This Modern Age*, which Rank saw as a counterpart to the pro-American *March of Time* series ‘which incensed him’. *Homes for All* (1947) was a one reeler which examined Britain’s housing situation covering much the same historical material as other films. It blamed Britain’s housing problem largely on the failure of government policy rather than the wartime bombing. Its proposals for the post-war basically endorsed and followed those of the Labour government. However, when the film was previewed to Rank and other executives his comment to Smith was that although he liked the fact that it talked of homes rather than houses, he thought the film had been wrong in criticising private enterprise for the ribbon development. However, to Smith’s surprise, despite the warnings of the other executives, Rank let Smith keep the film as it was. Incidentally, Aneurin Bevan liked the film. Similarly, Rank did not interfere with the next issue, *Coal Crisis*, even though it took an even more anti-capitalist stance, by attacking the private mine owners for their bad safety record and general mismanagement of the pits, recommending nationalisation or at least far greater co-ordination of the industry.

The Way We Live (1946)

The film follows a newly-demobilised writer, who visits Plymouth to discover what reconstruction means for one town. On arrival in the rain-soaked town he begins to investigate its problems and plans. He also talks to people involved in the plans, a councillor, the chief engineer and women in a community centre on an estate. The focus then turns to the human problems facing a bombed-out Plymouth family, the Copperwheats, as they move from a blitzed home to billets with a stranger, and on to a pre-fab. The town's chief planners Paton-Watson and Abercrombie are seen presenting an animated film and lecture on the plan to some Plymouthians, among them the Copperwheats. Various locals discuss and argue the proposals, but the narrator/writer is frustrated that most people are uninterested in the debate. He tries to elicit the interest of a sailor and a young woman by showing the model for the plan. The film cuts to a re-created scene of the council debate on the plan which leads into the drama of the general election [largely fought on this local issue] and is followed by a post-election anti-climax with plan apparently still-born. Bomb-sites are seen to be still in evidence and pre-fabs are depicted as a wholly unsatisfactory replacement for houses. Out of this hopeless scene step the youth of the city, who demonstrate for the realisation of the plan. The narrator is thrilled by their intervention: 'Youth, I had forgotten the impatience of youth. Will they help bring the plan to fruition?'.

The paternalistic approach to planning puts planners Patrick Abercrombie and Paton-Watson at the centre of the process, the planners are depicted as visionary figures.

Abercrombie in particular is shown as an artistic and imaginative man, with a brave conception of the future and an impatience to get things done. In one scene the camera follows him around Plymouth, as he single-handedly devises the new city, apparently conjuring images of the new city centre out of the air. This portrayal seems to exclude the involvement of Plymouthians in the planning process, but the film also contains examples of a more consultative approach. The narrator visits some housewives at a community centre in a Nissan hut on a dilapidated estate to ascertain their particular concerns and needs, directed there by Paton-Watson with the words if you 'gatecrash the mothers meeting then you'll know whether the plans are remote or not'. At this meeting real Plymouth women (the narrator/journalist was played by the only professional actor in this film) make various complaints about the distance of their homes from the shops for example and the inconvenience of having to fill their baths with buckets. The journalist makes other informal attempts to discover opinions on the plan by discussing it with the people he meets in the street. But he complains that there seems to be no way of establishing what the people really want. Watson and Abercrombie attempt to do so during the presentation of their plan to a meeting with local people. At one point they suggest expanding the city, a proposal whose response is an outcry from the audience, wishing to preserve rural areas. But the planners' presentation is really a lecture, there is no evidence of a more formal mechanism for drawing the people into the planning process.

The journalist's comments and his private attempt to canvas Plymouthians on the plan are a subtle critique of the planning process. Craigie says now that she saw architecture and planning from a feminist point of view:

I was terribly against the paternalistic one [style of planning]. My feminism came into it, it was too much under the control of men anyway. And there wasn't quite the advanced state of research that you've got today, market research. But I had a sort of instinctive feeling that the people must be consulted far, far, far more.³⁹

Craigie's press material tends to support her recollections of her views on planning in 1944-5.

There are two ways of planning a city. Either one puts it in the hands of experts and lets them proceed with the knowledge that their judgement is bound to be best. Everyone, one hopes, will like the result once they see it. Alternatively, one may try to get everyone's enthusiasm in advance. There is then no doubt that the outcome will be the kind of city the majority favours. Obviously, there is something to be said for both points of view; but the latter is the only one possible in England.

However, it is hard to believe that her thoughts then were quite as polarised and clear-cut as they are today when there is a widespread condemnation of post-war planning and caricature of planners as demagogues and impractical idealists who ignored the views and needs of ordinary people.

³⁹Craigie, 14293/3, reel: 2

It would be wrong to say that these two approaches were totally at odds. Although some planners, notably Max Lock, paid particular attention to consultation during the preparation of town plans [see chapter six] all the major British planners of the period had been influenced by Patrick Geddes, who had established that plans could not be prepared until there had been a thorough social and environmental survey of the area.⁴⁰ Geddes had been particularly influential on the work of Abercrombie, who, as we have seen in the case of *Proud City*, began the process of the County of London Plan with a wide-scale survey of the capital in which consultation of the people was considered a vital element.

Craigie's criticisms of British planning were not solely directed at the professionals and processes: she was also frustrated by the lack of interest displayed by the people. Craigie did not believe this was entirely their fault and had first been drawn to the subject in order to clarify the issues for them. In the publicity material the aim of the documentary feature's 'social message' was to 'make the closed book of town planning understandable to every citizen whom it so vitally concerns'.⁴¹ When the production began, the plan was ready, but no work had yet started and the people of Plymouth were either disinterested or confused:

Some people confessed they could not understand the plan. Others said all they cared about was a new house. And, as though the issue were not already sufficiently complicated, it had both support and opponents in all political parties. That was the point at which we stepped in, "we"

⁴⁰ Helen Meller, *Towns, Plans and Society in Modern Britain*, (Cambridge, 1997), p. 53-54.

⁴¹ Two Cities film publicity for *The Way We Live*. Undated probably July 1946. BFI Library.

being a documentary film unit. We conceived the idea of airing the whole subject on the screen, so that eventually the townsfolk would be able to sit back and view objectively the plan and their relations to it.⁴²

Craigie was critical of the people for failing to show much interest in the plan. The narrator repeatedly comes up against the apathy of local townsfolk and is anxious that if they do not become involved they will not get the kind of town they want.

During the film's making Craigie had become impressed with the work of the town planner Charles Reilly, whose 'village green' style of planning offered an antidote to the political apathy that so worried her. Charles Reilly was appointed as the planning consultant to Birkenhead council in February 1944. While there he drew up a plan for a new satellite dormitory town in the Fender valley on the Wirral peninsular. Reilly was trying to recapture the organic community planning of the pre-industrial English village, in which the houses had been built around the village green, 'and the greens themselves arranged like the petals of a flower round a community building, the modern equivalent of the village inn'.⁴³

According to Reilly, this was very different from the ordinary garden suburb layout already prepared by the Borough engineer. Birkenhead council decided to publish both plans in the local press and it became a contentious issue. The Conservatives backed

⁴² Two Cities film publicity for *The Way We Live*. Undated probably July 1946. BFI Library.

⁴³ Charles Reilly, introduction to *The Reilly Plan: A New Way of Life*, by Lawrence Wolfe, (1945), p. 10.

the original plan, alienated from Reilly's version, by its communist and Labour party endorsement. The controversy was picked up by Picture Post which published an article illustrating Reilly's plan. The national Labour Party wholeheartedly supported Reilly's emphasis on 'community planning' and gave the scheme its blessing in a motion at the Party conference in December. It was also claimed to have practical benefits and to be substantially cheaper than other community plans because the integrated nature of the layout led to economies on road building. And its design was equally applicable to the redevelopment of built-up areas as to those which had been partially affected by bomb damage.⁴⁴ But it was its supposed political and social benefits that captured the imagination of people on the left. Reilly believed that the layout of the town would revive a former dynamic community life.⁴⁵

Lawrence Wolfe believed that Reilly's ideas were a panacea for a mass of social ills created by the 'isolationist system of living' found throughout British suburbia: sexual immorality, loneliness, a low birth rate, the drudgery of the housewife's work, poor relations within families and so on. Like Reilly, Wolfe thought that the 'isolationism of suburbia' had induced a state of political indifference and ignorance towards issues at a neighbourhood, council, national and international level.⁴⁶ In Reilly's community, people would have many opportunities to be informed and to discuss local and national issues while passing each other on the green or in more formal debates in the

⁴⁴ Wolfe, Reilly Plan, p. 19.

⁴⁵ Reilly's introduction to Wolfe, Reilly Plan, pp. 11-12.

⁴⁶ Wolfe, Reilly Plan, pp. 82-84.

community centre. Moreover, the efficient design of the individual houses would give men and women the free time to be engaged in intellectual pursuits.⁴⁷

Craigie's consultations with Reilly during the scripting stage were influential. Despite the film's inevitable concentration on the Paton-Watson/Abercrombie plan, Craigie nonetheless tried to incorporate elements that related to Charles Reilly's planning principles, as she recalls:

On the village green idea, everybody mixes and they discuss things, and they won't take it all from the radio, and from authority. And that was his idea, and that wasn't in the Abercrombie plan. And I brought it into my film as a reaction against the paternalistic attitude....⁴⁸

When the journalist talks to the women on the council estate he makes a veiled reference to the Reilly Plan by reporting that they 'want to live on a village green'. When Paton-Watson and Abercrombie are lecturing on their plans for Plymouth, they make some statements which have much in common with Reilly's theories. When Paton-Watson is describing the proposed neighbourhood units it becomes clear that the plan is about more than building: 'The City of the future should make it easy for people to get together. If we start planning for community life it won't be too easy to build a docile people that takes its ideas from the radio and newspapers.'

⁴⁷ Wolfe, Reilly Plan, pp. 133-4.

⁴⁸ Craigie, 14293/3, reel: 2

Although Reilly and Abercrombie's plans were quite different, they shared some crucial elements. Both planners believed in building towns on the basis of self-contained neighbourhoods, each supplied with the correct number of schools, nurseries, libraries, health centres and other public buildings considered essential to foster family and community living and prevent people from having to travel long distances. Both approaches also shared a commitment to creating communities which were socially mixed.

Whatever the film's noble intentions, Craigie was honest about its impact. Although it broke all box office records for Plymouth cinemas, producing the longest queues ever known, this did not necessarily mean it had fulfilled its objectives:

Today the people of Plymouth are still arguing about the plan. At least there is no longer any danger of it being whittled away; the fundamental principles have been accepted. We who made the film like to feel that we helped to achieve that; but of course there is no proof.⁴⁹

When *The Way We Live* came to be released John Davis endeavoured to suppress it, placing it in cinemas in bad locations in the East End, where it was booed, and Warrington during Wakes Week. Fortunately, C.A.Lejeune, the Observer's film critic, viewed it at a trade show and started a concerted press campaign in its support and against the narrow-mindedness of the commercial distributors who had dismissed it as a

⁴⁹ Two Cities film publicity for *The Way We Live*. Undated probably July 1946. BFI Library.

film with limited appeal. The influential ‘trade’ reviewer, Josh Billings, of the Kinematograph Weekly, thought that the film

obviously intended to make the general public “town-planning” conscious and pep up local authorities but it wanders too far from its point and is much too regional fully to achieve either purpose. Screen propaganda must be both lucid and concise before it can hope to compete with or act as substitute for the conventional “Second”. This is tame and rather precious pictorial pamphleteering. Ticklish proposition, anyway, for the general run of halls.⁵⁰

The press campaign secured the film’s wide national distribution on the Odeon circuit largely because the controversy made it more saleable; it did not necessarily indicate a change of heart by the distributors. The ‘trade’ was not entirely negative, when defending itself from the attacks of the ‘lay press’, which had accused it of being unimaginative, obstructive of intelligent films and politically biased, it was conceded that Craigie’s film was actually pretty good, and probably better than most ‘B’ movies it was designed to replace. It was described as a documentary which had been ‘given elaborate feature treatment’, and made with a ‘lavishness unheard of in a film of its type’.⁵¹ In fact this same reviewer guessed that the film must have cost £65,000 to make; a compliment to Craigie since it only cost £40,000.

⁵⁰ Josh Billings reviewing *The Way We Live* in Kinematograph Weekly, 25 July 1946.

⁵¹ ‘Two Unusual Films That Challenge the Trade’s Booking Wisdom’, Kinematograph Weekly, 22 August 1946.

The Way We Live was highly praised by the 'lay press', although their comments should be qualified by their context as part of a campaign which used Craigie's film as a weapon to beat the commercial distributors. Most of the reviewers were impressed that Craigie had succeeded in producing a film which was human and thought-provoking, without being dull.⁵² Fred Majdalany of the Daily Mail was pleasantly surprised to find that the film had not fulfilled his usual expectations of a documentary that 'suggests flat heels, austerity and the dinginess of the average Food Office'.⁵³ Even the Kine Weekly reviewer said that it tackled 'a mass of human material - evacuees escaping from the Blitz, adolescent shop girls flirting with Americans on Plymouth Hoe' and 'with such a wealth of characterisation that it nearly has story values'.⁵⁴

The film's national run began in Plymouth where the premiere was held. The local press was very supportive, praising the cinematography and acting of the locals. Its qualities, it was hoped 'might even help the Government to agree with the Lord Mayor that the devastated cities cannot, of their own financial resources realise all that their courage would attempt'.⁵⁵

One local resident who saw the film was doubtful that it would do much to advance the cause of reconstruction.

I left the Kinema with mixed feelings. How convincingly the plan of the New Plymouth was presented and how simple it sounded in

⁵² Sunday Express, 28 July 1946.

⁵³ Fred Majdalany, Daily Mail, 26 July 1946.

⁵⁴ Kinematograph Weekly, 22 August 1946.

⁵⁵ Plymouth Western Evening Herald, 30 July 1946.

theory. In spite of the Reconstruction Committee's insistence on all possible speed I feel that not more than a quarter of the plan will materialise and even that will take several years.....Judging by the queues outside the Kinema this film has once more revived the interest of the man in the street in what is to be done to erase the scar which lies across our city, but *The Way We Live* will not tell him very much. When was this film made and what has been done in actual fact since its completion?⁵⁶

By the late 1940s and early 1950s the plans for Plymouth and similar cities had been scaled-down, and the emphasis shifted to the building of council houses and industrial space.⁵⁷ Of the cities where Abercrombie had been the major planning consultant (Coventry, Portsmouth, Hull, Plymouth, Southampton), Plymouth and Hull were unusual in that the wartime plans remained largely intact, despite local opposition. An historian of reconstruction, Nick Tiratsoo, argues that war-time enthusiasm for these particular plans, which was stimulated by official propaganda and international interest, meant that local politicians and the Treasury could only make small modifications to the original plans.⁵⁸ Given that the film favoured the plan, it is true to say that it sustained and even revived local enthusiasm for it (as the local quoted above observed), during the period following the general election, when people were losing interest in politics and the more grandiose aspects of reconstruction. Because the film generated this support, it contributed to ensuring that certain features of the Watson-Abercrombie vision, notably the design of the city centre, were seen in the statutory development plan.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Plymouth Western Evening Herald, 2 August 1946.

⁵⁷ Nick Tiratsoo, Reconstruction, Affluence and Labour Politics: Coventry 1945-60, (1990), pp. 108-9.

⁵⁸ Tiratsoo, Reconstruction, p. 107.

⁵⁹ Alison Ravetz, The Government of Space: Town Planning in Modern Society, (1986), p. 70.

Homes For the People (1945) was written and directed by Kay Mander, an experienced documentary director who had made a number of films for the MOI, first with the Shell Film Unit and later with Paul Rotha Productions.⁶⁰ It was produced by Basic Films, the company she had set up with her husband R.K.Neilson-Baxter. Commissioned by Odhams Press/the Daily Herald via Film Centre, the brief was to make a film which would promote one of the Labour Party's major platforms for the General Election. Choice of subject was left to the film-makers, but it was stipulated that the film should be from a woman's point of view, hence the choice of Mander as director. She and Edgar Anstey, the producer, chose housing as the subject, and decided to revive the direct interview technique that had been used for *Housing Problems* (1935). By liaising with people in the Labour Party and the Workers Film Association, Mander and the production team were given the names of suitable interviewees around the country, some of whom were active in their local Labour Party branches.

The film was un-scripted. After a preliminary discussion, interviewees were filmed describing the particular problems of their houses and improvements that could be made, Mander prompting them with questions from her notes. She wanted the interviews to be as naturalistic as possible. As she explained, this was hard to achieve: 'it's very difficult to get people to talk directly to a camera without sounding like they are just

⁶⁰ *Homes for the People* (1945), sp: daily Herald, pc: Basic Films, dir: Kay Mander, pr: Edgar Anstey, 23 mins. approx.

saying what they've learnt'.⁶¹ To overcome this self-consciousness, the interviewees talked while they were doing their household chores. This gives a very relaxed feeling to the interviews, as if the subjects are casually chatting with a neighbour. This technique also provided an inconspicuous break during which Mander could pose another question:

To enable one to shoot them talking in short sections, so that in between you could cut to what they were doing without it seeming very intrusive, it was just a natural thing. She's peeling potatoes, all right we've got a shot of her peeling potatoes, the audience doesn't immediately think, "Ah they're going to ask her another question, she's going to start talking about something else".⁶²

The aim of the film was not only to document the problems of people living in slum housing, but to look at those people who were employed yet still lived in standard houses that were badly designed and had inadequate facilities. In other words, it demanded improved housing conditions for a large proportion of the British people, not just for the stigmatised under-class. At the time Mander, her team and the film's backers had a wider agenda:

No, we'd done slums. This wasn't about slums, it was just ordinary people, people round the corner, who weren't getting what they were entitled to after all they [had] been through for the previous four or five years.⁶³

Homes For The People responded to the popular demand for houses with gardens.

Specific requests were left to the interviewees who detailed the improvements that their

⁶¹ Recorded interview with Kay Mander, IWM Sound Archives, accession no. 14292/14, reel 7.

⁶² Mander, 14292/14, reel 7.

⁶³ Mander, 14292/14, reel 7.

homes needed. The commentary makes a commitment on behalf of the post-war government to incorporate labour-saving devices in the house to free families from domestic drudgery, thus giving them time to be active citizens. This aspect of Mander's commentary reflected a widely-held belief which she shared with other left-wingers, that more efficiently designed homes would give people the 'time to take an interest in local politics, be active in the community, and generally not just sit at home and feel shut off from things'.⁶⁴

The film proposes to nationalise the land to enable comprehensive planning, and that central government should assist local authorities with the great reconstruction task ahead. The response to one woman's scepticism about these promises ever being honoured, is the assertion that economies of scale as a result of mass-production would reduce the costs of the big housing programme. *Homes For The People* ends with views of a crowd and a summons to the people through trade unions and tenants' associations to pressurise the government to build the houses they want. Finally, in an obvious plea on behalf of the Labour Party, the commentary calls on the audience to elect 'those whose interest is the welfare of the working people of the country'.

Homes For The People was finished in May 1945 and first screened in Blackpool to coincide with the Labour Party conference. Thereafter it was distributed on 16mm through the Workers' Film Association mainly to audiences sympathetic to its message.

⁶⁴ Mander, 14292/14, reel 8.

The secretary of the WFA, Joseph Reeves, had been involved in overseeing the film through the Odhams Press/The Daily Herald committee set up to guide it. Sadly, in the end, it was not given the wide distribution which had no doubt originally been intended for it.⁶⁵

Land of Promise (1946)⁶⁶

The origins of Paul Rotha's *Land of Promise* stretch back as far as the summer of 1938 when he was working on a script for the Gas industry on 'architecture planning and the community', which was partly inspired by Lewis Mumford's book The Culture of Cities.⁶⁷ As Rotha wrote at the time: 'It will tell how Everytown in 1938 England grew up; how housing and public services have been related, or in so many cases unrelated to the needs of the community'.⁶⁸ Although Rotha does not mention it in Documentary Diary, there must be a link between this project and the Gas proposal made to RIBA in February 1939, to sponsor a film about architecture on the Institute's behalf.⁶⁹ As we have seen from the description of this episode in chapter one, Rotha was then a member of RIBA's Publicity and Film Sub-Committee which oversaw the project. It is not clear why the film was never made, but Rotha says that it was partly realised in John Taylor's wartime film *Goodbye Yesterday*, which was rejected by the MOI.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ No information on the film's distribution has yet been found.

⁶⁶ *Land of Promise* (1946) sp: Gas Council, pc: Films of Fact; dir: Paul Rotha; Assoc. dir: Francis Gysin, 67 mins. The film cost £8,065 to produce.

⁶⁷ Paul Rotha, Documentary Diary (1973), pp. 228-9.

⁶⁸ Rotha to Eric Knight, 20 December 1938, quoted in Documentary Diary, p. 228.

⁶⁹ Memo by Basil R. Ward, 'Proposed Film on Architecture', Supplement to the Council agenda, Minutes of the Council, meeting of 6 February 1939, RIBA Archive.

⁷⁰ This is more fully discussed in Chapter 2.

Rotha's return to the project underlines his interest in the subject and fear that without the help of propagandists such as himself, the opportunity for a radical reconstruction of Britain would be squandered. In the first years of the war he had predicted that the peace would bring a great battle with the forces of reaction. In September 1944 while working on the script for *Land of Promise*, he had lost none of his earlier pessimism:

Today we are on the German frontier. And then what?
The war behind the war will burst into flame. The great
political war. It's all taking shape now. A coalition
government? A political party election? With more than
half the country left-minded but with no genuine party
to support? Where do we go from here? Where indeed?⁷¹

As we have seen in chapter two, despite the fact that film-minded civil servants occupied important roles in the publicity section of the Ministry of Works and Building, Rotha was doubtful that the MOI and Treasury would sanction an ambitious planning film. Therefore, through the 1940 Council's Film Committee, he tried to interest those industries who would be most involved in reconstruction. At this stage however, Rotha's idea was not for a film limited to the reconstruction of the built environment, he had moved on since his work before the war with RIBA and wanted something more ambitious that would encompass the eight points announced recently in the Atlantic Charter. But Rotha began by contacting the town planner Thomas Sharp who had written a planning script for the 1940 Council Film Committee.⁷²

⁷¹ Paul Rotha diary, 3 September 1944, p. 61, Book 3, Folder 16, Box 23, Paul Rotha collection, UCLA.

⁷² Paul Rotha diary, 18 August 1941, p. 76, Book 1, Folder 16, Box 23, Paul Rotha collection, UCLA.

Sharp's script on urban planning attracted the interest of the gas industry and prompted an enquiry via Film Centre inviting Rotha to make the film. Influenced by his contacts with people like the scientist of nutrition John Boyd Orr, Rotha intended to expand the film's scope:

The idea [of the planning film] was sold to them [Gas] on Thomas Sharp's script a la Pare Lorentz⁷³ with a hint of "The City" film. If I do it, Sharp's script must gradually be discarded and a real planning script substituted. Planning for human needs - that's all we can plan for. Let's find out what we know about the human needs: then we can plan for them. That's the only planning film that I want to make; and that goes right back to Orr's 'wee bookie' again with his three securities - home, food and a job.⁷⁴

Rotha wanted to use the same style as *World of Plenty* (1943) on the international production and distribution of food, which he was then making for the MOI. This new type of documentary interwove archive footage, graphically presented facts and statistics, dramatised sequences and contributions from politicians and independent experts to create a 'film argument'. Although *World of Plenty* is better known than *Land of Promise*, at the time Rotha had high hopes for the latter film, believing that it could be 'more important even than the Strategy of Food [*World of Plenty*], because it is even more fundamental'.⁷⁵ He saw it as part of a coherent trilogy of films, in which *World of*

⁷³ Pare Lorentz was an American writer on film and a political journalist who became a documentary filmmaker. His first film, *The Plow That Broke The Plains* (1936), was a film about the Dustbowl and the government's relief programme. The success of this film led on to *The River* (1937), which was a pro-New Deal film based around the Mississippi river.

⁷⁴ Paul Rotha diary, 22 April 1942, p. 27, Book 2, Folder 16, Box 23, Rotha collection.

⁷⁵ Paul Rotha diary, 25 July 1942, p. 35, Book 2, Folder 16, Box 23, Rotha collection.

Plenty would be the first, 'Planning for Human Needs' second and 'Planning for Happiness' the third.⁷⁶

Initially the Gas industry had 'reacted most favourably to the so-called "philosophical background" to the planning film',⁷⁷ though it took over a month and a half considering the first outline entitled 'The World is One' which is lost.⁷⁸ This indecision stemmed from a concern that 'its international conception was too big for them to sponsor'.⁷⁹ Rotha tried to persuade members of the Committee to accept his vision by showing them the recently completed and critically acclaimed *World of Plenty*.

The bunch of smoothies they're afraid of it. They "felt that the Gas Industry should not spoil the chance of success of the second film in the Trilogy by linking it with Gas's name". So polite and so courteous, cold feet. They were so charming about it, too. They would like to help - but....⁸⁰

In order to secure the commission Rotha eventually accepted the Gas Industry's wish to produce a less ambitious film which concentrated on the issue of shelter in Britain. Finally, after much work, the script was produced in September 1944, although this underwent further revisions in November. Filming began in mid-September 1944 and by 19 December the production had reached the editing stage.

⁷⁶ Paul Rotha diary, 3 April 1943, p. 5, Book 3, Folder 16, Box 23, Rotha collection.

⁷⁷ Paul Rotha diary, 26 April 1943, p. 13, Book 3, Folder 16, Box 23, Rotha collection.

⁷⁸ Preamble to a 'Treatment for a Film on Housing', by Wolfgang Wilhelm and Ara Calder Marshall, 6 February 1944, Box 2, Rotha collection.

⁷⁹ Rotha to Neurath, 1 July 1943, 1/44, Neurath Archives, Reading University.

⁸⁰ Paul Rotha diary, 10 June 1943, p. 22, Book 3, Folder 16, Rotha collection.

As with *World of Plenty*, this film was the product of a collaboration between various like-minded figures.⁸¹ During the planning stage Rotha mentioned a number of people whom he intended to consult because they were ‘qualified to talk about social planning for human needs’: John Boyd-Orr, Otto Neurath, Henry Morris, Arthur Calder Marshall, David Owen⁸², and Lancelot Hogben.⁸³ The actual writing of the script was undertaken by people with a writing and film background: Calder Marshall, Carl Mayer (the script-writer of *Dr Caligari* and other features), Wolfgang Wilhelm, Yvonne Fletcher (Paul Rotha Productions) and the actor Miles Malleon. Of the advisors John Boyd-Orr and particularly Otto Neurath, the Austrian sociologist and Positivist philosopher, were the most influential and met with Rotha on a number of occasions to discuss the ideological and theoretical elements of the planning film.

These two men had a strong impact on Rotha’s outlook and his work. He had read their books and been impressed with their humanitarian and practical approach to

⁸¹ Timothy Boon, ‘Agreement and Disagreement in the Making of World Of Plenty’, in David Smith (ed.), *Nutrition in Britain: Science, scientists and politics in the twentieth century*, (1997), pp. 173-4

⁸² Sir (Arthur) David Owen (1904-1970) was an academic who worked in economics, citizenship, unemployment, housing, planning and related fields. In the early 1930s he joined Political and Economic Planning, an independent organisation founded to research and promote the planning of various aspects of public life. Between 1940-41 he was General Secretary of the Political and Economic Planning. He then became personal assistant to Stafford Cripps at the Ministry of Aircraft Production until 1943; and then had a succession of posts in international relations at the Foreign Office’s Reconstruction Department, League of Nations Affairs; the International Labour Conference and the UN.

Arthur Calder Marshall (1908-1992) was a left-wing author and journalist who was interested in films writing a biography of Robert Flaherty, *The Innocent Eye* (1963), and for a time working at the MOI Films Division where he liaised between film-makers and officials. As well as assisting with the writing of *Land of Promise* he also wrote the script for Rotha’s post-war film *The World is Rich* (1947).

⁸³ Lancelot Hogben was Professor of Zoology at Birmingham University. Including writing academic works on genetics, physiology and biology, he had written books for a popular audience to widen the understanding of science. Paul Rotha diary, 25 July 1942, p. 35, Book 2, Folder 16, Rotha collection.

building a better society.⁸⁴ Although from different backgrounds and specialisms, Neurath and Boyd-Orr had much in common. They were both non-affiliated left-wingers, shared an interest and commitment to documentary film, and believed in planning and scientific solutions to human and social problems. There was also an internationalism about their approach. In *World of Plenty* the subjects of the production and distribution of food were moved beyond the discussion of Britain's efforts to overcome wartime shortages, to a post-war scenario in which the practice of lease-lend was applied to ensure the eradication of world hunger. In the future human needs rather than financial profit was to be the principle governing the production and distribution of food. When the three men began to formulate their ideas for the planning film for Gas they adopted similar principles to show how a 'comprehensive plan' encompassing the production and distribution of all raw materials, including labour, could secure all basic human needs.⁸⁵

Neurath in particular wanted to show that planning could enable individual expression, opportunity and freedom, concepts which people on the right, characterised by a figure in *Land of Promise* called 'Know-All', claimed was the antithesis of planning.

I think we should stress the point that planning for happiness, enables us to increase MULTIPLICITY compared with competition....important. Usually

⁸⁴ Rotha read Otto Neurath's *Modern Man in the Making*, (1939), in February 1942, Rotha diary, 19 February 1942, Book 2, Folder 16, Box 23, Rotha collection. He read the manuscript of Boyd-Orr's book in April 1942. Rotha does not give the title of the book in question but it was probably either *The Nation's Food*, (1943) or *Food and the People*, (1943). Orr's book *Food, Health and Income* (1936) was famous partly because it helped to publicise the research which showed that a high percentage of the population had a poor diet due to low income, and that 1/5-1/4 of the nation's children who came from the poorest families had a diet that was totally inadequate for good health and development.

⁸⁵ It has proved very difficult to find records in the Gas archives of any film productions. Fortunately there exists some correspondence in the Otto and Marie Neurath archives at the Department of Graphic Design, Reading University and also references in Rotha's diary at the UCLA.

planning has been described as something reducing freedom.⁸⁶

Given such a radical programme, and, in the light of the controversy caused by some of the proposals in *World of Plenty*⁸⁷, it is hardly surprising that the British Commercial Gas Association had rejected the 'World Is One'. Although the scope of the project's subject matter was reduced and made more parochial, the final film retained elements of this radical 'comprehensive plan'. This was particularly due to the influence of Otto Neurath who became one of the major contributors to the film's theoretical basis because of his knowledge of social housing and economics. In the 1920s he had been General Secretary of a family co-operative housing project in Vienna. This experience, combined with his planning work in Munich during the First World War and tenure as the Economic Minister of the brief Berlin revolutionary government in 1919, led him to the view that *Land of Promise* should not treat reconstruction of the built environment in isolation, but as one aspect of a fully planned economy. Neurath explained to Rotha, that from his Viennese experience, short-term building programmes were detrimental to the economy and the labour force. Instead it was necessary to develop a long-term construction policy which would be the most practical and least disruptive of the 'social order'.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Neurath to Rotha, 9 February 1943, 1/44, Neurath Archive, Reading University.

⁸⁷ The controversy surrounding the film is covered in Timothy Boon, 'Agreement and Disagreement in the Making of World of Plenty', in David Smith (ed.), *Nutrition in Britain*, pp. 180-86. And also in Toby Haggith, 'Post-war Reconstruction as Depicted in Official British Films of the Second World War', (Msc dissertation, Birkbeck College, University of London, 1991), pp. 11-14.

⁸⁸ Neurath to Rotha, 8 March 1944, 1/44, Neurath Archive.

Apart from Neurath's theoretical impact his best-known contribution to Rotha's films was the animated pictorial symbols called Isotypes. Isotype (Instructional System of Typographic Picture Education) was a system of standardised symbols developed by Neurath and the designers Marie Reidemeister and Gerd Arntz, to explain to the general public concepts and data relating to science, health, housing and planning.⁸⁹ Isotype was first presented in the Gesellschaft-und Wirtschaftsmuseum (Social and Economic Museum) in Vienna in an exhibition designed to further the process of building social housing and planning the city. The team strove to make the symbols a pure and simple distillation of concepts and objects so that they were universal and readily comprehensible. Visually they resemble the markers used in maps [see appendix]. Avoiding an artistic and illustrative approach the Isotypes are, despite this sober aim, often beautiful. Such a reductionist approach has much in common with the design theories of the Bauhaus where Neurath had been a visiting lecturer.⁹⁰

Neurath's philosophy was didactic as well as populist. He hoped that Isotype, which was developed into a language akin to hieroglyphics, would transcend linguistic and class barriers. Thus he was particularly keen to put Isotype in films, because as he said to Rotha when expounding on post-war possibilities, 'Film is more international than printing'.⁹¹ While Neurath was undoubtedly a political animal of the left he did not

⁸⁹ After a dramatic escape from Holland as the Germans invaded, Otto and Marie lived in Oxford and married.

⁹⁰ Peter Gallison, 'Aufbau/Bauhaus: Logical Positivism and Architectural Modernism', Critical Inquiry, Summer (1990), p. 720. Isotypes have had a tremendous impact on typography and graphics while the way of working developed by the team is considered to be the first design office structure.

⁹¹ Neurath to Rotha, 30 May 1942, 1/43, Neurath Archive.

consider himself a propagandist. The purpose of Isotypes was to give people the information in a neutral form, from which they could draw their own conclusions.⁹² To underline this point, the designers who transcribed concepts and statistics into Isotypes were called Transformers.

Isotype and Neurath's ideas about public participation aroused interest among British planners. In 1945 the council of Bilston, a small town in the Black Country, appointed him to explain their reconstruction plans to the locals by acting as an 'intermediary' between the people and the planners. Neurath described his role as a 'consulting "sociologist of happiness" to see that the *planners* know what the *people* want'.⁹³ To do this Otto and Marie set up an Isotype exhibition in a disused shop in a slum district to explain Bilston's housing problems, the proposed reconstruction programme and related social issues. The Neurath's 'Venture' in Bilston, described by some as a 'Sociological approach to town planning', was praised by many in the architectural and planning community, who regarded it as a more human approach which saw social and personal development as important as the practical imperative to provide better shelter.⁹⁴

⁹² Neurath to Rotha, 25 October 1942, 1/43, Neurath Archive.

⁹³ Stanley Baron, 'Man With a Load of Happiness', News Chronicle, 4 December 1945.

⁹⁴ Mr.A.V.Williams (Bilston town clerk), Mr.D.Wragge Morley, and Sir Charles Reilly: 'Sociological Approach to Planning: The Bilston Experiment- A Problem in Social Engineering', Discovery, August 1947.

Land of Promise has rightly been accused of overloading the viewer with facts, or ‘statistical impressionism’.⁹⁵ But what is most significant about the film is its polemical structure which was designed to radicalise the audience by drawing it into the argument being conducted on the screen. To do this Rotha chose a theatrical style.

I used well known actors because I wanted to put a point across. I do not believe, and I may be in a minority in this - that documentary just has to go to the actual to be documentary. I think it is the social purpose that matters.⁹⁶

The ‘film argument’ style of *World of Plenty* and *Land of Promise* was inspired by the *Living Newspaper* plays staged in New York by the Federal Theatre Project, one of the artistic beneficiaries of Roosevelt’s National Recovery Administration programme. Rotha had spent six months in the USA from 1937-38 and seen a performance of one of the series of six productions called ‘One Third of a Nation’, which was about housing. The scripts, based on the work of a team of researchers, dramatised issues in the news in order to reveal the background to contemporary problems. The subjects tackled included the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, America’s agricultural slump and the oppression of the American worker. Arthur Arent, one of the writers for the plays, has explained that the method was not to dramatise a particular event in the news but:

the dramatization of a *problem* - composed in greater or lesser extent of many news events, all bearing on the one subject and inter-larded with typical but non-factual representations of the effect of these news events on the people to whom the problem is of great importance.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ This term was used in the review in the *Times Educational Supplement*, 4 May 1946 and the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 31 May 1946, and by Roger Manvell in a review from the British Council Press department, 5 June 1946, in a BFI Library microfiche about the film.

⁹⁶ Paul Rotha in Elizabeth Sussex, *The Rise and Fall of the British Documentary*, (Los Angeles, 1975), p. 154.

The actors played key politicians and other figures, as well as presenting the perspectives of each class through caricature. As Arent explained 'One Third of a Nation', was a quotation from a Congressional statement on the percentage of the population that was ill-housed. The actors reproduced the debate in congress on the proposed housing bill, as a 'literal transposing of a front page story', then dramatised a slum scene introducing a character to represent those living in poor housing.⁹⁸

This character represents the one-third of the nation. He is the audience's identification, the bridge that leads to an understanding in human terms of the subject of the debate. And the proof of his being is the debate itself.⁹⁹

The plays were controversial, satirical and openly left-wing. Rotha described 'One Third of a Nation' as the 'theatrical counterpoint of the British film *Housing Problems*. It was real documentary theatre.'¹⁰⁰ While in New York Rotha discussed their technique with Arent, and Joseph Losey, who directed most of the productions. One of the aspects that most interested Rotha was the dynamic and interactive nature of the performances, made possible by placing a loudspeaker at the back of the auditorium to provide facts and commentary as well as acting as a spokesperson for the audience. As Rotha explained to the Russian film-maker Pudovkin: 'if the action on the stage falsely

⁹⁷ Arthur Arent, 'The Techniques of the Living Newspaper', writing in 1938, reprinted in *Theatre Quarterly*, 4 (1971), p. 57.

⁹⁸ Arent, 'Living Newspaper', *Theatre Quarterly*, 1 (1971), p. 57.

⁹⁹ Arent, 'Living Newspaper', *Theatre Quarterly*, 1 (1971), pp. 57-8.

¹⁰⁰ Paul Rotha, *Documentary Diary*, p.191.

portrayed the events, the voice interrupted - sometimes angrily, or cynically, or wittily - thus keeping the argument straight'.¹⁰¹

Rotha saw that film could exploit the potential of this style even better. Before the war he had experimented with the 'film argument' but it was most fully developed in *World of Plenty* (1943) and *Land Of Promise* (1946). The factual background to the argument that in the plays had been provided with newspaper headlines, a 'timeline' and the loudspeaker, was cinematically transposed through archive film and Isotype. To emphasise the impartial nature of the information provided by Isotype, Rotha and Neurath had been searching for a method of producing a suitably inhuman voice, and for *Land of Promise* had found an electronic machine called the Vocoda to create a 'precise didactic, machine-like' sound.¹⁰²

The role of the 'Commentator' or 'Observer', spoken by Frederick Allen, was to help the audience follow the film's argument. However the producers revealed a cynicism about the value of this traditional cinematic device. Doubtless as a criticism of commercial newsreels and the press, the 'Commentator' was described as 'impartial' but 'self-styled not yet aware that there can be no such animal'.¹⁰³ The voice of 'Hansard', however, was presented as a functional and truthful observer because it was the actual people's representative in the Commons. More credence still was given to the

¹⁰¹ Rotha to V.I.Pudovkin, via Soviet Division, MOI, 28 March 1945, p. 1, Folder 5, Box 66, Rotha collection.

¹⁰² *Land of Promise* dialogue script, p.ii, 5 September 1944, Box 2, Paul Rotha collection.

¹⁰³ Dialogue and shooting script of *Land of Promise*, 5 September 1944, Box 2, Rotha collection.

contributions of ordinary people, the voice of ‘Woman’, provided by Elizabeth Cowell, was said to represent ‘the more permanent human values’ and to be the ‘only character with a real claim to detachment from the ups and downs of events, though she does not claim it’.¹⁰⁴

In *World of Plenty* crucial aspects of the argument were lent extra authority by the appearance of ‘talking heads’, notably the Minister of Food Lord Woolton and Sir John Boyd-Orr.¹⁰⁵ At the beginning of the production of *Land of Promise* the intention was to use a more famous figure such as Sir William Beveridge, but this had to be abandoned; perhaps due to the objections of the Gas sponsors, wanting to minimise any controversial elements in the film. In the end *Land of Promise* employed the Christian Socialist priest, Father John Grosser of Stepney, and Sir Ernest Simon, former Chairman of Manchester’s Housing Committee who had been responsible for the slum clearance programme in Wythenshawe which at the time was the biggest government housing project in Europe.¹⁰⁶

In *Land of Promise* three characters, ‘Housewife’, ‘Know-All’ and ‘Voice’ (Man in the Street), were used to represent universal archetypes and mouth their position on the housing debate. Unlike the *Living Newspaper* productions, Rotha decided to keep most

¹⁰⁴ Dialogue and shooting for *Land of Promise* script, 5 September 1944, Box 2, Rotha collection.

¹⁰⁵ The person suggested at this stage was Sir William Beveridge.

¹⁰⁶ Sir Ernest Simon, Chairman Manchester Housing Committee, 1919-1923; Lord Mayor of Manchester, 1921-22; Parliamentary Secretary of Ministry of Health, 1931; Chairman, sundry committees in the Ministry of Works, 1942-44. Among his books were How to Abolish the Slums, and Rebuilding Britain-A Twenty Year Plan (1945).

of his characters off-screen for the majority of the film, introducing them in the last scene. 'Housewife' was played by the actress Marjorie Rhodes, who had previously played a tough working-class woman in *Love on the Dole* (1941). This hard-working and harassed character would have been familiar to most in the audience, but so too might 'Know-All', a pompous and complacent right-winger played by Miles Malleon: 'Cheerful, that's my name. The good old Britisher...sense of humour, decent respect for tradition, and all that. The plain man, with horse sense. You ask me old boy. You'll find I'm generally right'. We have seen a similar character in the MOI films *New Towns for Old* and *A City Reborn*. 'Voice', ('Man in the Street') played by the actor John Mills, had a key role. As an ordinary young man, who in the end is revealed as a soldier, he was designed to be a figure with which the audience could identify and thus engage more directly in the film's ideas. He was symbolic of a youthful impatience with the old world. He also represented the mass of decent but un-politicised British people who had to be radicalised if socialism was to be achieved. As he introduced himself in the first reel: 'Me, I'm nobody much - no-one bothers about me. I never bothered about much until now. I've been thinking, that's when you start bothering'. Although the producers considered 'Voice' and much of the audience as politically unsophisticated, they hoped to appeal to a common humanity and independent bloody-mindedness personified by 'Voice'. Thus in the script notes of September 1944, his character is described as 'inquiring, attentive, not afraid of serious topics, frames his thoughts and opinions in realistic and concrete terms. Common sense at its most practical and best'.¹⁰⁷ 'Voice'

¹⁰⁷ Dialogue and shooting script of *Land Of Promise* 5 September 1944, Box 2, Rotha collection.

also served the function of the loudspeaker employed in the *Living Newspaper* productions, as an argumentative member of the audience determined to see the truth is established and the implications of the argument acted upon.

By adopting the *Living Newspaper* style Rotha brought the political street corner meeting, with speaker and hecklers, into the cinema. One review of *Land of Promise* noted that the film degenerated ‘into a soap-box oration’.¹⁰⁸ In the 1920s and 1930s many political parties, particularly those on the left such as the Communist Party, welcomed hecklers because they helped to draw a crowd, create interest and highlight the counterpoint in an argument; the dialectic, an approach to debate and thought associated with Marxism. Some speakers even planted stooges in the audience to heckle the speaker and help develop a particular line of argument.

Land of Promise

Land of Promise begins with a scene of a couple with their baby standing in the countryside. The commentary makes a simple and emotive statement about the importance of home:

A home of your own, what most of us wants. A home for a man, his wife and kid, entitled to it. We want a home somewhere the kids can grow up, somewhere we can call home. Home, happiness, love, peace.

¹⁰⁸ Manchester Guardian, 20 April 1946.

The audience is then introduced to the voices and characters who are to present the film's argument. It is divided into three parts. The first 'Homes as they were', looks at the history of housing since 1918 documenting the failure of inter-war housing policy to provide the promised homes for the returning ex-servicemen. In particular it shows how lack of proper planning and a reliance on the free market to build housing, meant many of the worst slum areas remained. Isotype statistics and comments by Father Grosser of Stepney, establish an unquestionable link between housing conditions and health. Grosser states: 'No one except fools dare deny that the infant mortality rate is directly related to poor housing.' We visit the slums, the commentator advising the audience to 'hold your nose, here we go'.

Throughout this section 'Know-All' and 'Voice' increase the polemical nature of the debate by their interjections. 'Voice' becomes excited when he sees the success of popular action in the form of tenants' demonstrations. By contrast 'Know-All' tries to suppress controversy, asking why it is necessary to dwell on the failure of the state to provide homes for the returning ex-servicemen after the First World War: 'all the agitators run down our country', he moans.

'Homes As They Are' demonstrates how the war has both deepened the housing problem, and created the political atmosphere and popular will to make radical change possible. For example evacuation is said to have drawn wider attention to the slums, while mass military recruitment has revealed the deleterious effects of slum housing on

national health. But wartime measures led to great improvements in people's quality of life: 'Britain needed a healthy nation and was determined to have it'. National standards of health were tackled through the state's intervention with the creation of mass catering in cheap subsidised canteens, equal rations of food, free vitamin supplements for children and free access to medical care: State intervention in the economy and direction of manpower improved production, increased efficiency and provided a lesson for peace, 'when we had to do it we did it - not for profit but for need'.

'Homes as they Might Be' takes place in a pub. 'Know-All' and his crony stand at the bar considering the film's argument so far. The commentator recalls Churchill's commitment in 1943 to build a new world after the war. This is compared with similar promises made by Lloyd George in 1917. 'Know-All' and his friend are shocked into silence by the implications of the parallels between the two speeches. As the scene progresses, 'Voice', aided by the commentators and Isotype, develops a programme of reconstruction using the tools of the wartime state and the popular radicalism of the people to give them what they want at whatever cost. Specifically, four million new houses; a priority to repair blitzed homes and recondition pre-war slums; to appropriate large unoccupied houses to be made into flats for the homeless; to establish a central planning authority; to build all the other social amenities and provisions of good community such as health centres, schools, libraries, to nationalise the land and for the state to take control of the economy and industry. 'Know-All' is horrified by these proposals. 'Planning will be the death of individual liberty, mark my word!' he warns.

‘Voice’ replies that ‘It will be the death of that narrow stupidity that you and your sort don’t seem to be able to break away from. And it will be the death of the slums.’ As ‘Know-all’ tries to reject these proposals, ‘Voice’ reminds him that the state was not reluctant to plan or intervene in the free market or society in order to win military victory. The same spirit of determination and unity between state and people must now be directed in the battle of the peace: ‘What about this war against want and unhappiness - this is another war for freedom - The battlefield over thickly-crowded areas and our slums is our front line.’ At this point ‘Voice’ steps out from the audience and into camera, and we see it is John Mills in army uniform. He now directs his appeal beyond the sceptics in the pub to the common people of Britain:

It's in your hands right now, yours by the
constitution of this country - all the ministries
of this and that, they are the servants of us. All
the MP's in the towns and cities tell us you have
the right - that's real democracy, that's what
we've been fighting for. Will you use your right,
or will you allow more depressions, more slums...

.....Come on, make up your minds.
If you lose this chance it may never come again.
There are millions of us, you and me, we are the
British people, no power on earth can stop us once
we have the will to win.

For reasons that are not explained, the film took longer to complete than expected and was not ready till September 1945, when it was shown privately to Stafford Cripps, President of the Board of Trade and Aneurin Bevan, Minister of Health.¹⁰⁹ Cripps was

¹⁰⁹ Rotha to John Wales, Dartington Hall Film Unit, 16 September 1945, Films of Fact Company letters, Folder 4, Box 73, Rotha Collection.

particularly impressed with the Isotypes and asked Rotha to look into producing a film employing Neurath's graphics for the Board of Trade on exports.¹¹⁰ Two months later it was viewed by the Gas Executive Council (a group composed of Gas representatives from around the nation). As Rotha had predicted at the end of 1944, the 'intensely political' nature of the film 'frightened' the executives at Gas, with the result that they would not allow the industry's name to be connected with the film; although they did agree to pay their portion (£6,465) of the production costs. This left £1,600 to be paid by Films of Fact.¹¹¹

Rotha was not too down-hearted because he was confident that the new government would take it on themselves and distribute it as an official film.¹¹² But by the end of October Rotha had begun to suspect that the Government's attitude was cooling, as he wrote to a friend: 'Despite all the enthusiasm of Cripps, Nye Bevan, Jennie Lee¹¹³ and so on, I do not think it will be taken over as a government film.'¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Rotha to Neurath, 1/45, 14 September 1945, Neurath Archive. *The Balance* (1947), sp: COI for the Board of Trade, pc: Films of Fact, dir: Jack Holmes, 10 mins. 'The necessity of imports and exports is illustrated by animated diagrams. The film included an interview with Sir Stafford Cripps'.

¹¹¹ Rotha to John Boyd-Orr, 14 February 1946, Films of Fact correspondence, Folder 3, Box 73, Rotha collection.

¹¹² Rotha to John Wales, Dartington Hall Film Unit, Films of Fact correspondence, 16 September 1945, Folder 3, Box 73, Rotha collection.

¹¹³ Jennie Lee was a Labour M.P. from 1929-31 and then again from 1945. The daughter of a Scottish miner she was also married to Aneurin Bevan. In 1964 she was made the Arts Minister by Harold Wilson and set up the Open University.

¹¹⁴ Rotha to John Trevelyan, Education Dept. Westmorland County Council, 31 October 1945, Folder 5, Box 72, Rotha collection.

In the end Bevan did reject *Land of Promise*. Rotha has since claimed that this was because it featured a communist-inspired rent strike.¹¹⁵ He also suggested that the film was out of place in the new Labour government:

No longer did the Labour people want films to expose bad housing conditions: *Land of Promise* was uncomfortable to the Labour Ministry of Health! They wanted films to instruct local authorities how to build pre-fabs. The emphasis had passed from attack to construction; it was too early to praise.¹¹⁶

The film's style and uncompromisingly radical tone was also an obstacle to commercial distribution. With difficulty Rotha secured a six-week run for the film at London's Academy cinema in March/April 1946, but it was impossible to get national distribution. *Land of Promise* had only two commercial showings outside London, for three days in Oxford in June and a week in Oldham in May 1947. Its only other screenings were on the film society circuit where it was shown in a number of British cities and in Ireland and was enthusiastically received.¹¹⁷

As an indication of the controversial nature of the film, the British Board of Film Censors, whose opinions were closely followed by the industry, had asked Films of Fact 'that the unnecessary inclusion of shots of the Royal family in the state coach seen in contrast to slums, might be deleted for obvious reasons as they have no bearing on the

¹¹⁵ Paul Rotha, *Documentary Diary*, p. 280.

¹¹⁶ Paul Rotha, quoted in E. Sussex, *British Documentary*, p. 163.

¹¹⁷ *Land of Promise* was screened at the following non-theatrical venues: by the Association of Scientific Workers and WEA at Birmingham University, 13 June 1947; at the Edinburgh Film Guild in 1946; the New Film Society in North Wales, 6 June 1946; Manchester and Salford Film society in May and October 1947; and the Irish Film Society 25 January 1947.

theme of the film'.¹¹⁸ The Kine Weekly reviewer gave the following assessment of Rotha's latest release:

While there is a good deal of interest especially in the later reels, in this ingeniously constructed documentary, it is rather apt to outstay a welcome, put over too strong a propaganda angle and savour more of the schoolroom than the studio....¹¹⁹

In the August 1946 Kine Weekly article which discussed the controversy surrounding the Craigie and Rotha films, *Land of Promise* was considered the least marketable of the two, because it belonged 'exclusively to the documentary tradition' which meant that its small budget was reflected in the visuals.¹²⁰

The other major drawback of Rotha's picture was its strident hectoring tone and complicated literary technique.

Whereas the Craigie film is warm-hearted and even jocular, Rotha's is the work of a man with a serious message, unrelentingly determined to say it seriously. The picture fairly shouts that message; the viewpoint is put over while all the organ stops are pulled out.¹²¹

The distribution problems led Rotha to accuse the commercial distributors of political bias. The Kine Weekly's response to Rotha's accusation was ambiguous:

It is not that Rotha does not try to give all sides to his problem. He does. But the weight

¹¹⁸ BBFC to Films of Fact, 23 November 1945, Box 2, Rotha collection.

¹¹⁹ Kinematograph Weekly, 2 May 1946.

¹²⁰ Kinematograph Weekly, 22 August 1946.

¹²¹ Kinematograph Weekly, 22 August 1946.

comes down so heavily for the progressive view that no one but a congenital idiot could fail to regard the picture as a very skilled brief for a particular viewpoint. This fault, as we have said does not decry it necessarily, but merely questions its suitability for the rank and file of the business.¹²²

Even Basil Wright, a fellow documentary film maker and former colleague of Rotha's, noted that his passion and earnestness to express his argument led to a degree of buttonholing of the viewer by the commentary. He also felt that by making such an explicit appeal on behalf of the Labour Party in the last scene, the film had already become dated.¹²³

People on the left welcomed the film. The Daily Worker described *Land of Promise* as 'a passionate argument about housing....inevitably the argument brings us to a planned economy as a way to plan housing: inevitably its conclusions are socialist.'¹²⁴ However, some of those who agreed with the film's political conclusions and were admirers of Rotha's work, shared the commercial reviewers doubts about its style. A reviewer in Building lamented:

a good line of propaganda, ably illustrated by diagrams and pictures: this is bad cinema, for the pictures in themselves tell no story and for lack of this are in themselves less telling..... Would this film not have gained in force had there been a connected human story running through the whole, like a thread through a

¹²² Kinematograph Weekly, 22 August 1946.

¹²³ Basil Wright, Documentary Newsletter, no. 53, (1946), p. 41.

¹²⁴ Daily Worker, 26 April 1946.

necklace?¹²⁵

To commercially-minded cinema managers and distributors, *Land of Promise* was barely worth considering. The booking manager of the ABC circuit informed the renting company holding *Land of Promise* ‘that it was the worst film he had ever seen’.¹²⁶ Rotha tried to exert pressure through the Board of Trade to gain distribution. Stafford Cripps was sympathetic to independent film producers, who were having problems getting commissions as well as access to cinemas since the end of the war. There was even an informal meeting with John Davis of Rank, Cripps and Rotha, to discuss the distribution of documentaries on the circuit. One of the measures to assist them was the Film Selection Board established by Harold Wilson to get British titles onto the circuit which were not popular with commercial distributors.¹²⁷ Despite these initiatives Rotha’s application to the Board for *Land of Promise* was unsuccessful.

Conclusion

This account has demonstrated that film-makers could be more radical and outspoken when they were producing films independently of the government. However, commercial sponsors did not give producers a free rein, and often monitored productions

¹²⁵ J.D.M. Harvey, *Building*, June 1946, pp. 164-167.

¹²⁶ Paul Rotha to W.Mallalieu M.P. 19 July 1946. The writer and politician William J.P. Mallalieu was the Labour M.P. for Huddersfield from 1945-50. He worked on London newspapers between 1933 and 1941 then joined the Royal Navy, serving from 1941-1945.

¹²⁷ One example of such a film is *Chance of A Lifetime* (1950), an independently produced comedy made for £150,000 by Bernard Miles’s company Pilgrim Pictures. It is about the owner of an engineering works who, impatient with the trade unionism of his men, hands control of the factory over to them. The major circuits claimed that it was not entertaining and refused to show the film until forced to do so by the Film Selection Board.

closely. We know from Rotha's records that Gas saw at least one version of the *Land of Promise* script in August 1944, and that Rotha had meetings with Gas during the scripting and pre-production stages in 1944.¹²⁸ Gas was also cagey about its connection with the film and Rotha had to keep the identity of his sponsor secret during most of the production. This was a disappointment to Rotha and others who had naively thought that independent funding would free them from the political constraints of the MOI. When Reynolds News had discussed the project with Rotha on completion of the script, the paper anticipated a radical film:

Fortunately, the film has an unknown private backer and is not dependent upon any ministry or official departments. Paul Rotha does not intend to study the tender feelings of any vested interests. It will be a case of no punches pulled and no holds barred.¹²⁹

There was also a surprising amount of government involvement in the production of commercially funded films, especially at the early stages. For example not only did Gas have to approve the 'World is One' but the treatment also had to be passed by MOI officials.¹³⁰ In the case of *When We Build Again*, the amount of government involvement suggests that a more accurate categorisation of this film would be as semi-official propaganda. Jack Beddington even tried to gain some control over *The Way We Live*, explaining to Craigie, at the RIBA Film Committee, that he would like to help her but that all scripts had to be seen before facilities were given for production.¹³¹ This shows

¹²⁸ Rotha's desk diaries show that he had a meeting at Gas Industry House on 21 March 1944; with the Gas Publicity Committee on 8 May 1944, Desk appointment diary 1944, Box 57, Rotha collection.

¹²⁹ Reynolds News, 27 August 1944.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Minutes of the Films, Broadcast and T.V. Sub-Committee, 1 February 1945, 11.1.7, RIBA Archive.

that the government was concerned to ensure that some control was maintained over propaganda released outside MOI's direct sphere. This was particularly important in the case of films about post-war reconstruction policy for which consensus was so superficial. This problem was appreciated by the producers of *Land of Promise*, who anticipated that the film's topical nature would mean that the script, particularly the final third dealing with 'Homes as They Might Be', could be subject to revision during production, as could aspects of the dialogue.¹³²

Land of Promise, *Homes For The People* and *The Way We Live* have a shared aim to re-awaken the people's interest in radical reconstruction and mobilise them politically, specifically by voting for the party (obviously the Labour Party) most likely to introduce such a programme. But due to the conservative nature of the cinema distributors and the propagandist nature of the films, this message was an irrelevance. Rotha hoped *Land of Promise* would have an impact on the politicians, but to his disgust Labour ministers found the film's reconstruction programme so radical that they would not even assist in distribution.

The film-makers wanted to involve people in the planning process. This is revealed in the films in a number of ways: a concern and depiction of the mass of 'ordinary people'; by depicting surveys and informally by interviews and discussions with house-wives; the use of Isotypes; the attempt to clarify planning and housing theory

¹³² Introductory notes for dialogue and shooting script of *Land Of Promise* 5 September 1944, Box 2, Rotha collection.

and put it in a human context. It is likely that during the war *When We Build Again*, which supplemented the TCPA's travelling exhibition, proved a very useful way of interesting and informing the public about housing and planning. Whether the film contributed to greater participation in the eventual planning process is hard to judge. There is some evidence that *The Way We Live* contributed to the planning process in Plymouth and helped sustain popular interest in the plans for the rebuilding of the whole city. As will be seen in chapter seven, this film also became important nation-wide as public relations officers frequently took the opportunity of a commercial screening to publicise local reconstruction plans. At the end of the war until the late 1940s, in a number of blitzed towns, people remained enthusiastic for similarly bold schemes. It is quite possible that *The Way We Live* and other films contributed to this mood. But by the late 1940s publicity of any sort had no effect as the people's interest in town planning waned and they became ever more focused on being given a house, regardless of the overall plan into which it was placed.¹³³

Reviewers repeatedly praised the human approach to planning displayed in these films. Craigie and Mander shared a more human, even homely vision of planning which was in stark contrast to Rotha's didactic interpretation in *Land of Promise*. Although Craigie was impressed with Rotha's film she had rejected his advice during the planning of *The Way We Live* to make 'a film of purely factual character'.¹³⁴ She wanted 'to

¹³³ Tiratsoo, *Reconstruction*, p. 106.

¹³⁴ Minutes of the Films, Broadcasting and T.V. Sub-Committee, 28 December 1944, 11.1.7, RIBA Archive. In the same discussion another committee member Mark Abrams had 'pointed out the necessity of relating the problems involved to the actual living conditions of the average citizen'; which was the angle she eventually pursued.

translate [her] film into more human terms', to 'have characters in it, real people, his was an intellectual argument wasn't it, *Land Of Promise*?¹³⁵

A new concern introduced by Mander and Craigie was the implications for women of new houses and planning. They believed that houses which were efficient and well-served with labour-saving devices freed women from the drudgery of household management so that they could take part in more communal and intellectual pursuits.

The kind of communities that were envisaged in these films would be politically dynamic and communal. Influenced by planners, sociologists and architects such as Charles Reilly and Otto Neurath, the film-makers were keen to instil a desire for a society that rejected the 'isolationist' living of suburbia. These ideas which were, as we have seen largely from Neurath, partly inspired by the European continental left and architects such as Le Corbusier, did not extend to a modernist design of people's homes. Here the films reveal a reactionary culture in favour of traditional cottage style architecture. During the planning of *Land of Promise*, Neurath said that although he was willing to include some examples of modern houses, he implied that the film should reflect the fact that after the war better-built homes, in the traditional style, would prevail as 'people' in Britain 'even more than on the continent, wanted to have what they had before'.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Craigie, 14293/3, reel 3.

¹³⁶ Neurath to Rotha, 9 January 1945, 1/45, Neurath Archive.

Though these films had a mixed impact, this does not lessen their importance: they also served to raise the profile of a socialist and consultative approach to planning and to bring the ideas of people such as Neurath and Reilly to a wider audience. The films were well received by educated and middle-class audiences who were planning and film-minded. *Land of Promise* and *The Way We Live* were particularly popular with film societies. At the New Film Society in Colwyn Bay, when members were canvassed for their preferences for the coming season many asked to see a long documentary such as *The Bridge* or *Land of Promise*.¹³⁷ Although there is no evidence to suggest that as a result of exposure to these films there was a radicalisation in the process of British reconstruction, it is reasonable to conclude that these people's understanding of the issues became more radical.

¹³⁷ 16mm Film User, Vol. 1, November 1946.

Chapter Five: The Production of Government Films on Housing and Planning, 1946-51.

The Labour government's policy on the built environment was based on existing trends, but introduced some innovations and new commitments that reflected its ideological belief in providing quality homes for all, as of right. Thus, the 1946 and particularly the 1949 Housing Acts re-confirmed and extended the trend of putting the responsibility for the construction and management of social housing onto local government. Unlike the inter-war period, however, the bulk of house building was to be financed by the state, reflecting Labour's belief that private enterprise always failed the needy and the more widespread prejudice against the 'Jerry built' housing of the inter-war period. The control of building through a licensing system, combined with the shortage of materials, meant that public house construction outran private at a rate of 5:1.

A significant change, was the attempt to move public housing for rent into the mainstream of housing provision, by removing the stipulation that it should be exclusively for the working class. This attempt to socially integrate the nation, was also reflected in the New Towns Act of 1946 which tried to ensure that new towns were socially mixed. A further illustration of this policy was the government recommendation that estates be constructed with a variety of housing types.

With the Party's commitment to provide 'a good standard of accommodation' for 'every family in the land', Labour policy broke with a British tradition of marginalising

public housing for the poor.¹ Moreover, as a result of Minister of Housing Aneurin Bevan's personal commitment new housing was of high quality, reversing another tradition of setting minimum health standards for social housing rather than optimum requirements for a comfortable home. Two other significant innovations were the attempt to improve the lot of tenants in private accommodation by setting up rent tribunals in the 1946 Act and the encouragement of local councils to build sheltered housing for the elderly.

Labour's planning policy committed the government to alleviating the problems of the cities through the creation of new towns and the prevention of urban sprawl with the green belt. However, although the Town and Country Planning Act (1947) gave the state planning control of building development, the Labour government had taken the more moderate step of nationalising the development rights of the land, rather than the land itself as promised in the manifesto.² Finally, the 1947 Act confirmed Labour's commitment to wide-scale reconstruction, directing local authorities to submit their development plans by 1951, with the recommendation that all plans should be drawn up after public consultation.

The Labour Party's commitment to planning and reconstruction, including the acceptance of new towns, seemed to have stolen the thunder from those campaigning film makers of earlier years. Organisations like the RIBA Film Sub-Committee now principally viewed film as an educational tool to train the architects and planners of the

¹ Labour Party manifesto, Let Us Face The Future, (1945), p. 8.

² Labour Party manifesto, Let us Face The Future, (1945), p. 9.

future. However, as the victory celebrations died away housing became one of the most pressing problems for the post-war government. In this climate film for information and propaganda seemed as relevant as before.

The war had destroyed or damaged 3/4 million homes creating a housing shortage exacerbated by demobilisation and a baby boom.³ Unfortunately, the shortage of skilled labour and materials, and a financial crisis after 1947, made the new Labour government's reconstruction programme seem increasingly unrealistic. In 1948, although house building reached a peak of 227,000 houses, the programme was already behind the government's target of 1.25 million. Eventually Labour completed 900,000 houses from 1945-50.⁴ As the Labour Party's commitment to reconstruction of the built environment had been a key part of its election strategy, these unavoidable factors were unlikely to assuage people who were in some areas so desperate for housing that they resorted to squatting. Housing therefore had a high political profile. At local elections in the much bombed West Ham, for example, reconstruction remained the most important issue throughout the late 1940s, and one on which all the other parties sought to challenge the ruling Labour council.

In the spring of 1946 the newly formed Ministry of Town and Country Planning (MOTCP) suffered a set-back to its new towns programme when Stevenage council objected to the order to site the first new town there. The local court's upheld the Council's view that for the Minister, Lewis Silkin, 'Stevenage New Town' was a

³ Anne Power, Hovels to High Rise, State Housing in Europe Since 1850, (1993), p. 186.

⁴ Hovels, p. 188.

foregone conclusion, and that therefore he had ignored the people's objections at the local inquiry. However, the Court of Appeal over-turned this decision in favour of the Minister. When the Stevenage objectors took their case to the House of Lords, the result was again in Silkin's favour. Although a victory for the government, this battle reminded the Ministry that popular support for government policy on reconstruction could not be assumed.

At the end of the war film critics and observers such as Roger Manvell and Dilys Powell were impressed with the achievements of British cinema and they predicted a bright future for the industry. This would be assisted by a greater sophistication and discernment which they sensed among the normally plebeian British audiences. They believed that popular taste was shifting towards an interest in social and political issues. Dilys Powell observed in 1946 that: 'The British no longer demand pure fantasy in their films, they can be receptive also to the imaginative interpretation of everyday life'.⁵

The widespread use of film for propaganda and information in the Second World War had persuaded many people that film held an unrivalled position as the modern and effective mass communicator. Film was regarded as having a great future in education, for people of all ages and backgrounds:

In the same way as it provided instruction for millions of soldiers in the different techniques of modern warfare, it can give quick and extensive instruction in the processes and techniques required in the rebuilding of Europe. It can be the instrument for the rapid exchange between countries and information which is essential

⁵ Dilys Powell, Films Since 1939, (1947).

to the avoidance of international misunderstandings.⁶

Andrew Buchanan, the documentary film-maker and writer on film, saw the wartime growth of the non-theatrical movement as an antidote to the evils of jingoistic propaganda film: 'Whether it be the teaching of post-war careers, kindling international understanding, killing racial hatred, or rushing filmic aid to stricken peoples urgently in need of visual instruction to alleviate their ills - non-theatrical film is the mass movement of post-war fulfilment'.⁷

Others believed that film had a valuable role to play in helping to foster and encourage popular political participation. Across the Atlantic there was a lot of interest in the use of documentary film to lead discussion on topics such as town planning. Film Forums were seen as a very effective way to interest and inform adults on political and community issues, hopefully stimulating action. One study of Film Forums in Canada had shown that films did encourage people to come together for discussion of 'important subjects', and that the films themselves contributed to good discussion.⁸ In Britain, documentary film had been used in a less structured way by ABCA, and to a lesser extent by the WEA, to lead adult discussion. The wartime use of film, plus the North American experience, influenced post-war discussions on the use of film. Helen de Mouilpied knew of the Ottawa experiment, and believed that documentary film could 'bridge the gap between the citizen and the community of which he is a part'.⁹

⁶ Sinclair Road, 'The International Role of the Film', *Fabian Quarterly*, July (1945), p. 1.

⁷ Andrew Buchanan, *Film and the Future*, (1945), p. 64.

⁸ An Experiment With Film Forums Conducted by the Ottawa YMCA Public Affairs Committee, a report by H.Campbell, 30 January 1946. In a file called COI Papers unsorted, Helen Forman Papers.

⁹ Helen de Mouilpied, 'The Film and Local Government', *Progress*, 3 (1948).

Following the Labour victory many of the documentary film-makers thought that they would have an extremely important role to play in helping to create a new Britain.

For the first time we have a Labour government in Britain with a clear parliamentary majority, and the people are beginning to inherit the earth. We at DATA [Documentary Technicians Alliance] stand in a key position to give the people some of the information they need in order to reconstruct their inheritance.¹⁰

An obvious area where documentary film makers would be required, and one in which they had specialised, was reconstruction of the built environment. The Federation of Documentary Film Units pointed out to potential sponsors that film could assist with various aspects of reconstruction. The success of post-war planning depended on the degree to which people understood the issues of town planning and 'better homes', and film could illustrate these issues better than any other medium. Moreover, by showing the success of existing schemes, film could help to reassure those people who would have to move out of cities to live in satellite towns. Finally, film could help in a direct practical way by providing instruction to the technicians, builders and apprentices building the new Britain.¹¹

A key element of wartime thinking on planning reform had stated that the people should take an active role. This attitude was reflected in publicity produced by

¹⁰ DATA financial appeal document, quoted in Albert P Hogenkamp, 'The use of film as a medium of information with special reference to the politics of the 1945-51 British Labour Government' (PhD thesis, CNA 1991)

¹¹ Anon, 'Films and Housing', *FDFU Bulletin*, 5 (1947), pp. 1-2.

independent planning groups. The RIBA'S popular booklet Rebuilding Britain encouraged participation:

The experts can explain what could be done; but what do you and your neighbours want? Ask the woman next door, ask the soldier, the munitions worker, the farm worker and the bus conductor. They may not be clear about which sort of rebuilding they would like, but they do want something homely and human, something that gives comfort and privacy.....Some of the ways in which people can inform their ideas and express their determination are suggested at the end of this book.¹²

Similar statements also emanated from government. During a press conference at the new Ministry of Town and Country Planning, the Minister, W.S.Morrison, was keen to stress the role of the people in the creation of local redevelopment plans: 'I do not want the public to think that somebody is going to make a plan for them in the abstract without consulting them'.¹³

However, as early as 1943, some influential figures in the planning movement were beginning to express doubt that this participation could be achieved. Frederic Osborne warned of a gulf between the aims of professional planners and those of the public. He observed that while the priorities for planners were things like orderly lay-out of settlements, the preservation of the countryside, neighbourhood integration and architectural style, the people had much more down to earth concerns such as the features of their future homes, pleasant home surroundings, proximity of shops and schools. He believed that this gulf in priorities presented a threat to the radical reconstruction of

¹² RIBA, Rebuilding Britain, (1943), pp. 11-12.

¹³ PRO HLG 71/1255 Minister's Press Conference, 1943.

Britain. It seemed as if the public had only partly digested the wartime planning propaganda and as a result there was a danger that future reconstruction would advance little further than the unplanned suburban sprawl of the inter-war years. To avoid this repetition, Osborne urged the planning movement to mobilise the public to ensure real change: 'The main elements in town and country planning involve certain restrictions on existing liberties, and they can't be effected without a strong positive public opinion in their favour'.¹⁴

At the end of the war, A.V. Williams, who was involved in the planning of Bilston's reconstruction, argued that the much heralded expansion of participation in politics was a superficial phenomenon.

Unless great efforts are made now to continue the identification of social aim with individual well-being, the public will relapse into a routine of habit and thought which disassociates itself from social and political participation. That is the political climate to which planning aim must address itself.¹⁵

Like Osborne, Williams was under no illusion about the public's perception of planning. Despite all the films, pamphlets and other propaganda of the war years, the average citizen, he felt, 'wants a house and in his need he is little concerned with the culture of cities, although he vaguely realises that good housing and good planning are not disconnected'.¹⁶ Film and other publicity was misunderstood as an educational medium for planning. He felt that people would only understand and participate in

¹⁴ F.J. Osborne, 'Town Planning and Public Opinion', in report of the Town and Country Planning Summer School, (1943), pp. 71, 73 and 74.

¹⁵ A.V. Williams, 'Public Education in Planning' in proceedings of the Town Planning Summer School (1945), p. 144.

¹⁶ Williams, 'Public Education in Planning', p. 145.

planning when they were involved through surveys or began to see the planners work take 'structural form'.

Long after the war had ended participation continued to be a pressing issue. In 1950 PEP accused the planning process of betraying the democratic ideals of planning. In particular it blamed the 1947 Town and County Planning Act for making only token provision for public consultation in planning. This, the PEP report observed, had produced a number of unwelcome results: firstly, post-war building had become slow and overly bureaucratic, frustrating those people who were desperate for housing. Secondly, much of the rebuilding was of low quality, with, in particular, a paucity of amenities and social services provided on many of the new housing estates. Thirdly, the people's formerly positive attitude to urban planning had turned sour.¹⁷ The report's conclusion was that a concerted effort should now be made to bridge the 'gap between planners and citizens' and that at all stages of planning the people should be consulted.¹⁸

For PEP and other organisations and individuals, public relations, particularly the use of film, presented a possible solution to the problem of encouraging participation. In 1944 Paul Rotha had encouraged architects at the Architectural Association to grasp the particular contribution film could make to democratic planning:

I do not believe that in a democracy you can have a plan worked out by experts on anything and superimpose it on the people.....There will have to be several plans, and each one will need explanation, discussion and amplification before it will be accepted by the people in this country. In

¹⁷ PEP, Town Planning and the Public, first draft, 22 February 1950, pp. 1-4. PEP collection, BLPS Archive, LSE.

¹⁸ PEP, Town Planning and the Public, p. 5.

my view the screen is an excellent place for these preliminary discussions.¹⁹

Although Rotha was naturally keen to promote the value of documentary film to a large group of potential customers (he suggested each campaign would need around fifty films), his ideas on the potential of film were widely held. Indeed it is clear that some members of the audience had already considered these uses for film. In his introduction the President had commented on the possibilities of using films for training architects and also their wider application in planning. He was concerned about imposing reconstruction plans on a bemused or unconvinced public and excited that documentary might assist with this problem.²⁰ The secretary of the meeting was particularly interested in the way that statistical evidence could be explained pictorially on film. This suggested that survey material, used as the basis of reconstruction plans, could be made comprehensible to varied audiences 'from housing committees and town councillors to ordinary citizens'. 'Moreover', he continued, 'the film would reach wider audiences and call for less effort on their part than the exhibition'.²¹

Norman Tillett, who was a Labour councillor and the chairman of the Norwich town planning committee, shared this interest in the value of film and public relations. He was committed to the idea of democratic planning, and in fact argued that, as Stevenage had shown, without the citizens co-operation planning was politically impossible.²²

¹⁹ Paul Rotha, General Meeting of the AA (14 March 1944), quoted in The Architectural Association Journal, 685 (1944), p. 73.

²⁰ General Meeting of the AA, p. 71.

²¹ General Meeting of the AA, p. 71.

²² Norman Tillett was a solicitor by profession but well known in East Anglia as a WEA lecturer. He became a councillor in 1942 and was elected Mayor in 1958. Tillett was elected to the council of the TCPA in 1956. Norwich council was Labour controlled at this time.

In a democracy the active participation of the citizen in planning becomes essential; if the citizen feels that the planners' plan is an imposition upon him, his reaction will be expressed in the local and national ballot box.

Tillet was concerned that there seemed to be very little interest and understanding of planning at a local level, particularly by councillors. Apathy and ignorance in local government would create Stevenage's nation-wide. Tillett's solution was a programme of education in town and country planning aimed particularly at adults. This he hoped would not only raise awareness of the issues but possibly encourage younger and better informed citizens to participate in local government: 'the citizen who has been educated in planning is the more likely to desire to take part in the process of government in planning, whether as councillor or technical officer.'²³ One of the public relations tools recommended by Tillett was film. However, he felt that the planning film had little success when competing with entertainment films in the commercial cinema. Its real value was as an educational tool at special non-theatric screenings. In this context film could perform two functions: it could whet peoples appetite for the subject and then provide the basis for class discussion. For this reason he approved of planning films like *Twenty Four Square Miles* (1946), which were open ended rather than prescriptive. In addition to this quality, the film had been particularly successful at stirring up debate at a rural WEA Planning course because it dealt so closely with issues familiar to the audience.²⁴

²³ Norman Tillett, 'Planning and the Citizen', proceedings of the Town and Country Planning Summer School, (1947), p. 26.

²⁴ Norman Tillett, 'Planning and the Citizen', p. 22.

These discussions about the value of film had an impact on post-war attitudes to the production and use of film on the built environment. Moreover, a number of the people who took part in these discussions were involved in post-war production. Paul Rotha, who had produced *Land of Promise*, made a number of films for the COI including *Houses in History* (1946). He also produced *A City Speaks* (1947) for the Manchester Corporation, which included a sizeable section on the city's housing and planning policy. Helen de Mouilpied, who was so enthusiastic about the political value of film, worked at the Films Division of the COI as a senior member of the production section. Sir Stephen Tallents, who was the public relations officer at the MOTCP, had heard A.V. Williams talk on the problems of participation and was provoked into clarifying his ideas for PR including film. In 1945 Frederic Osborne approached J.Arthur Rank about producing a planning film²⁵ and two years later suggested to Mary Field that they revive their wartime idea for a colour film on dispersal planning.²⁶

After the war planning organisations screened films at meetings such as the 1946 AGM of the Glasgow Planning Forum where the proceedings were followed by a showing of *Proud City* and *A City Reborn*. The TCPA organised film shows in 1946 and 1947 in the designated new town areas of Hemel Hempstead and Crawley.²⁷ However, there was much less interest in producing films. The TCPA limited itself to producing the cheaper film-strips on town and country planning.²⁸ RIBA no longer regarded propaganda films as important. Their concern was to promote the educational and instructional use of film, especially within the building profession. Thus, the Films Sub-

²⁵ F.J. Osborne to J. Arthur Rank, 6 February 1945, F.J. Osborne Correspondence R-RZ, FJO Archive.

²⁶ Osborne to Mary Field, 14 September 1947, Films on Planning file, FJO Archive.

²⁷ Minutes of the Executive Committee of the TCPA, meeting of 19 December 1946, TCPA Papers.

²⁸ Minutes of the Executive Committee of the TCPA, meeting of 21 November 1947, TCPA Papers.

Committee decided its role was ‘to appraise existing films on architecture, town planning and building’ and to ‘give advice and guidance to prospective film producers’.²⁹

This inactivity was attacked by the editor of the Architects Journal who accused the profession, and particularly RIBA, of failing to exploit film:

The activities of [the film] committee now seem to be largely confined to the preparation of a list of films. It looks as though a great opportunity has been missed. The architect is still disastrously, all too frequently, regarded as an expensive though decorative supernumerary in the building hierarchy.³⁰

Writing in the same issue, R.N. Paterson was concerned that films on town planning and housing had tended to concentrate on the builders contribution, with little treatment of the architects role. His proposal was for architectural groups to co-ordinate the production of their own programme of documentary films. These films would be used to promote the role of the architect in town planning schemes and to train students of building and architecture. He suggested the production of a major documentary film with the inclusion of a star to play a fictional character so that the film had popular appeal. It should be:

a bright factual and entertaining film showing the essential part played by architects and builders in shaping the reconstruction of towns and cities, showing the utilisation of new materials, new methods of construction, and to stress the fact that all town planning is the joint effort of architect and builder.³¹

²⁹ Minutes of the Films, Broadcasting and T.V. Sub-Committee, meeting of 1 February 1945, 11.1.7, RIBA Archive.

³⁰ Editorial, ‘Use More Films’, The Architects’ Journal, 20 March 1947.

Although these proposals were not taken up, architects and planners did provide a valuable input into relevant film projects. After 1949 the RIBA Committee took a more active interest in the production of propaganda films, when it helped Basic Films by lobbying the MOTCP to sponsor a film explaining the aims of the new town and county planning act.³² The Committee chose to help Mander because the MOTCP seemed to have no plans to use film to publicise the aims of the legislation. The Committee was also involved in other projects. For example it was approached by World Wide Pictures who wanted to produce a 'building cine magazine' and advised the Ministry of Works on *The Task Before the Building Industry*.

Kay Mander of Basic Films also recalls many contacts with the Architectural Association, who she in some respects preferred to the RIBA: 'they were easier to get access to, they liked people going and talking to them. They liked to know about films, were always interested in everything there. The RIBA was always a bit like going to the MOI'. She particularly remembers seeking the advice of the AA when working on the COI project *A Plan To Work On* (1948).³³

In November 1945, a report examining government film requirements after the war again predicted that 'many more' films would be required by a number of ministries on reconstruction.³⁴ In fact, from 1945 to 1951 the COI produced at least eleven films

³¹ R.N. Paterson, 'Films: Their Use in Architecture and Building', The Architects' Journal, 20 March 1947, p. 231.

³² Minutes of the Films, Broadcasting and T.V. Sub-Committee, meeting of 6 July 1949, 11.1.7, RIBA Archive.

³³ Recorded interview with Kay Mander, IWM Sound Archive, accession no. 14292/14, Reel 11,

³⁴ PRO INF 1/634 Report on Government Film Production and Distribution, 1 November 1945.

about the built environment. A number of other projects were also discussed but did not come to fruition.

At the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, Sir Stephen Tallents, the Public Relations Officer, was keen to use films and models to inform the British public about ‘what was going on in their midst’ and also to satisfy ‘a thirst in countries overseas for information as to what Britain was thinking and doing about her reconstruction problems’.³⁵ A number of projects were planned but in the end the Ministry only produced *New Town* (1948) and *Houses in the Town* (1951).

There was also continued interest at the Ministry of Works which had its own film committee and sponsored *The House That Jack Built* (1946). The Ministry of Health was particularly active and sponsored a number of films on the national house building programme such as *Dover Spring* (1947) and *Country Homes* (1947) and, through its Scottish Department, *Fair Rent* (1946), *A Plan to Work On* (1948) and *Houses In The Town* (1951), the last being made with the Ministry of Town and Country Planning.

The Ministry of Education was interested in using film combined with other resources as a teaching aid. The history of English housing was the subject for its first ‘visual unit’ which included wall charts, models, a film strip and the Crown film *Houses*

³⁵ Sir Stephen Tallents, during the discussion on Public Education in Planning, proceedings of the Town Planning Summer School, (1945), p. 156.

in History (1946). The British Council's film *Picture Paper* (1946) looked at town planning by showing how an illustrated paper tackled this kind of issue.

Films were needed by the government to assist with various aspects of the post-war reconstruction programme. A particularly pressing requirement was the production of films to give practical assistance to the building programme. By March 1946 work at the COI had started on *The House That Jack Built* (1946) about the building apprenticeship and training council to encourage boys to go into the industry. *Shaping the Future* (1946), sponsored by the Ministry of Labour, outlined the improved conditions and prospects of the building trade, to encourage men, particularly those recently demobilised, to choose construction as a career. Films were also produced by the MOW to speed up reconstruction with a production on 'site organisation',³⁶ and others aiming to good building practices (*The Care and Maintenance of Building Plant*, 1950) and site safety (*Watch Your Step*, 1950). *Country Homes* was designed to encourage local authorities to use the Airey two storey pre-fabricated house which the government had produced in large quantities.³⁷ But the government was also keen to promote quality in the construction of public housing. *Research and Modern Housing* (1950), produced by the DSIR (Department of Scientific and Industrial Research), was released to show 'how building research' was applied in modern housing.³⁸ 'The Council Estate' which was probably the working title for *Houses in the Town* was intended to demonstrate to local authorities that 'a council estate need not be row upon row of exactly similar houses, but can contain varied types of houses and be good to look

³⁶ PRO HLG 108/11 Minutes of the Housing Publicity Committee, meeting of 24 January 1947.

³⁷ Film Production Programme 1947-48, Board of Trade. Forman Papers.

³⁸ PRO INF 6/792.

at and good to live in'.³⁹ *Fair Rent*, on the other hand, was designed to improve the lot of people in private rented accommodation by publicising the new rent tribunals.

As the housing shortage was so great after the war, the government wanted film to reassure the people that progress in construction was being made. The MOW film *The Task Before The Building Industry* (1950) was made to encourage construction workers and to reassure people that the task of reconstruction was being tackled, albeit slowly. The Minister of Health welcomed documentary films that could promote the 'results of the housing drive'.⁴⁰ When the COI was discussing with the Ministry of Health its film requirements up until 1948, it was agreed that public interest in housing was so great that a fourth film on housing would be needed, even if this meant dropping a proposed film on local government.⁴¹ Fife-Clark of the MOH suggested that this film should address the problems of rural housing and be designed to 'sell' the Airey House.⁴² In the summer of 1949 the degree of public concern about housing again led the MOH to modify its film programme, by enlarging the scope of a film on London housing to cover the whole of Britain and recommending that it was produced for theatrical distribution.⁴³

A key commitment of the Labour government was that all reconstruction should be conducted in a planned way. As a result, a number of government films were released

³⁹ Film Production Programme 1947-48, Forman Papers.

⁴⁰ Report of Documentary Film, Extract from Minutes of the Ministerial Committee on Home Information Services, meeting of 12 November 1947, Forman Papers.

⁴¹ PRO MH 55/910 Letter from Helen de Mouilpied (COI Films Division) to Fife-Clark (MOH PR), 4 November 1946. The three films already proposed were 'Rehousing in Dover', 'The First 30,000, 1 reel report from the users, on the houses already built by August 1947' and 'The Council Estate- 2 reels either on home management or the need for mixed building. Directed at local authorities'.

⁴² PRO MH 55/910 Letter from Fife-Clark to Helen de Mouilpied, undated, shortly after 4 November 1946.

⁴³ PRO MH 79/597 Minutes of the Home Film Programme Committee, meeting of 19 July 1949.

to explain and promote town planning. Despite the budget restrictions on film production imposed by the Treasury (the Paymaster General made a reduction of £1 million to £640,000 in 1947) COI officials remained committed to films on town and country planning. When planning the COI's 1948-49 film production, although cuts had to be made in various departmental programmes to meet Treasury demands, town and country planning was included among those subjects considered sacrosanct: 'It would be difficult to find a subject of more importance which has been so inadequately explained as the new towns development'.⁴⁴ In 1949, during discussions of the inter-departmental Film Programme Sub-Committee, the chairman, John Grierson, mentioned a proposal to make a series of films on the work of government ministries. His opinion was that films about the MOTCP (five were proposed) should take priority over those of other more famous ministries, because 'gaining public co-operation' was so important to its work. In addition, the meeting agreed that films were urgently needed to 'enlist public sympathy for planning before schemes were ready to be put into operation in 1951'.⁴⁵

Films were also produced which aimed to assist specialists and politicians responsible for redevelopment plans. The COI film *A Plan To Work On* (1948) about the replanning of Dunfermline was commissioned by the Scottish Department of Health, and primarily aimed at audiences of 'non-architectural' local government officers responsible for planning.⁴⁶ William Ballantine of the Scottish Information Office wanted 'something

⁴⁴ Memo from Helen de Mouilpied to Tritton and Sendall, '1947-48 Estimated Production Programme, 20 February 1947', Forman Papers.

⁴⁵ PRO MH 79/597 Minutes of the Home Information Services (official), Films Programme Sub-Committee, John Mumford (MOTCP), meeting of 3 May 1949.

⁴⁶ Minutes of the Films, Broadcasting and T.V. Sub-Committee, meeting of 6 July 1949, 11.1.7, RIBA Archive.

of the history of the subject and also how a progressive local authority is tackling the problem'.⁴⁷

New towns were an integral part of the Labour government's programme. They were essential to the success of its overall reconstruction plans, and came to be seen as the embodiment of the new Britain that Labour hoped it was creating. We gain a sense of this from a comment by a civil servant at the MOTCP, who hoped that films about new towns would be included in the Festival of Britain programme.⁴⁸ Denis Forman and Helen de Mouilpied, who both held senior positions at the COI Films Division, were 'new towns fans'. Forman was enthusiastic about the contribution film could make: 'I wanted town and country planning films to be helpful and practical'.⁴⁹ But in 1946, in the light of the problems at Stevenage, the MOTCP had a more urgent and straightforward purpose for films: it wanted 'to sell the idea of new towns'.⁵⁰

As early as May 1946, civil servants at the MOTCP had begun discussing the production of three films on new towns, one to explain the theory and background to their development 'How and Why New Towns', 'An Englishman's Home' to air the political and social implications of new towns and an ambitious historical film record of the development of Stevenage. The third film was to be made over a period of ten to fifteen years.⁵¹ In addition to this new towns epic, it was also thought that shorter films

⁴⁷ INF 6/547 William Ballantine, Scottish Information Office to C.R.Jones COI, 8 March 1947.

⁴⁸ PRO MH 79/597 Minutes of the Home Information Service (official), Films Programme Sub-Committee, John Mumford (MOTCP), meeting of 3 May 1949.

⁴⁹ Recorded interview with Denis Forman, IWM Sound Archives, accession no. 14732/3, reel 3.

⁵⁰ Forman, 14732/3, reel 3.

⁵¹ PRO HLG 90/36 Minutes of the New Towns Committee, meeting of 20 May 1946.

would be made of the other new towns for inclusion in newsreels.⁵² Such was the interest at the MOTCP in film propaganda that it approached the British Council in order to revive the wartime animation film it had long discarded on garden cities.⁵³

In November 1946, Stevenage was designated a new town, but in some respects this was a Pyrrhic victory. The violence of the opposition to the proposal (including vandalism to the Minister's car) had shocked the MOTCP. The incident revealed that many local people living where proposed new towns were to be built viewed these developments with trepidation, fearing that the towns would be largely composed of ex-slum dwellers and that the locals would be 'swamped by a lot of people with dirty habits and no manners'.⁵⁴ It is likely that the MOTCP was most impressed by the popular demand for housing at the end of the war, and had overlooked these sort of objections. In fact, their own survey of the public had shown a strong interest in new towns. In January 1946 a radio broadcast on new towns had asked listeners three questions and invited them to send their answers to the MOTCP. The questions asked people to choose whether they would prefer to live in the country, an old town or a new town; the ideal population for that town; and their profession. Out of the 893 replies received by 6th May, 553 favoured new towns, 164 the country and only 100 the old town. Many people also chose to write in more detail about their thoughts on housing, often describing their own appalling situations, perhaps hoping that the Ministry would intervene directly on their behalf.⁵⁵

⁵² PRO HLG 90/471 Minutes of the New Towns Committee, contribution by Mr. Mosbacher, meeting of 9 December 1946.

⁵³ PRO HLG 90/34 Eric Mosbacher (MOTCP) to Primrose (BC), 18 February 1947.

⁵⁴ PRO HLG 90/35 New Towns Division to Mr. Dobbie, 17 April 1947.

⁵⁵ PRO HLG 84/17 New Towns Broadcast Replies. The programme was broadcast on 15 January 1946, and presented by Monica Felton. Mr. Goddard's letter of 16 January 1946, is a good example of the kind

It was considered that poor public relations had been one of the main causes for the problems in Stevenage. At Harlow there were similar complaints that an ‘unfortunate and rapid deterioration in public feeling towards the new town proposal’ was due to ‘erroneous information or lack of information’ from the Ministry.⁵⁶ To combat these prejudices the MOTCP had various ideas. To reassure the indigenous populations of Harlow and Stevenage, trips were organised to Welwyn in order to ‘open the eyes of the people in the new town areas to what could be done by planning’.⁵⁷ A model of Ongar was made to display in the dispersal areas and it was suggested that a Brains Trust be arranged on the subject.

Film was an important part of the public relations process and it was asked if local cinemas could be persuaded to screen films on planning such as *The City* (1939), *When We Build Again* (1942), *The Way We Live* (1946), *Land of Promise* (1946), and *A Planned Town* (which had been recently completed about Welwyn).⁵⁸ The Ministry's proposed films on new towns now became even more crucial. The film to explain its new towns policy, *New Town*, had a high profile: ‘The subject is regarded as one of the greatest importance the Minister himself is taking a personal interest in the film’.⁵⁹ When the Treasury withheld consent for expenditure on this film (actually a cartoon),

of housing problems many people were experiencing in cities. He had served in the Navy for six years. After demobilisation he was forced to live with relations in London because his own house had been destroyed in the blitz of 1940. His wife was still evacuated and living away from him. His housing officer had said that he had nothing for him. His letter included the plea: ‘How long am I to be separated from my wife. Surely some temporary accommodation can be found?’

⁵⁶ PRO HLG 90/38 Memo Mr. Tennant (MOTCP) to Mr Dobbie, 23 October 1946.

⁵⁷ PRO HLG 90/31 Minutes of the New Towns Publicity Committee, meeting of 7 February 1947.

⁵⁸ PRO HLG 90/38 Minutes of New Towns Publicity Committee, meeting of 29 July 1946.

⁵⁹ PRO INF 6/1349 7 February 1947.

because of the judicial battle over Stevenage, the MOTCP was annoyed as the film was not about the town and the ‘only relevance to Stevenage is that it has underlined the urgency of educating the public about our new towns policy’. It was now ‘more important than ever that the film be produced with a minimum of delay’.⁶⁰ Although there was a high degree of government interest in the production of propaganda films on the built environment, and indeed a number of films released, the task of producing these films was in some ways more difficult than during the war.

As we have seen, many documentary film-makers welcomed the Labour election victory of 1945 and anticipated that they would have an important role to play in the new society. However, the new Labour government was extremely cautious in its approach to propaganda and information. While it wanted ‘to expound and explain the government’s policies to the citizens at large’, it also did not want to be seen to be exploiting government resources for propaganda purposes.⁶¹ Denis Forman recalls the dilemma thus: ‘the concern was this, that they should not be seen to be having a propaganda agency, either in films or print, because propaganda was a really dirty word at that time because of Hitler’.⁶²

The creation of the COI highlights the difficulties the Labour Party had with the concept of government public relations. During the war there had been official discussion about the future of the Ministry of Information. While it was agreed that it had been a

⁶⁰ PRO HLG 90/34 Eric Mosbacher (MOTCP) to Ronald Tritton (Director COI Films Division), 1 March 1947.

⁶¹ Denis Forman, 14732/3/2. See also R. Williams Taylor, Was I Really Necessary? (1951), and William Crofts, Coercion or Persuasion? : Propaganda in Britain after 1945, (1989).

⁶² Forman, 14732/3, reel 2.

success, it was felt that the existence of an information department with Ministerial power was peculiar to wartime. The official consensus was that it would last until after the war was over and then it would be replaced by some kind of government information agency. However, when the war in Europe ended, the MOI fought to be retained, arguing that without Ministerial power an agency would be too weak to be effective. Clement Attlee ignored these arguments, deciding in December 1945 that to retain a Minister of government information would be 'politically dangerous'.⁶³ During the General Election campaign Churchill had made an extremely misplaced attack on the Labour Party, predicting that it would create a totalitarian state. This tactic was unsuccessful but highlights the context in which government use of propaganda could be viewed. To have retained the MOI would have gone back on an agreement of the wartime coalition and laid the new government open to further attacks of this nature. On the 1st April 1946, the MOI was replaced by the Central Office of Information (COI), a down-graded service department. Herbert Morrison, the Lord President, reduced the autonomy of this new organisation still further, by ensuring that each ministry was responsible for its own publicity, employing the COI only as an agency.

This attitude of caution towards the use of propaganda film created a great deal of confusion among film-makers and civil servants and was a dilemma that may have hampered many possibly valuable projects. Reg Groves, a scriptwriter who had worked with Strand Films, approached the COI at the end of 1946 with a proposal to produce a film about Labour's first year in power. It was to be financed by the Co-operative

⁶³ PRO INF 1/598 Quoted in Tom Wildy, 'From MOI to the COI-Publicity and Propaganda in Britain, 1945-51: the National Health and Insurance campaigns of 1948.', Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, 1 (1986), p. 5.

Wholesale Society (CWS), with the COI making the film and organising distribution. In Groves scenario the film begins with an acknowledgement of Labour's victory, firmly associating it with the peoples' rejection of pre-war unemployment, inequality and slum housing. A passage was then to follow describing the immense difficulties facing the new government: continuing war against Japan, Britain's large debts, shortages of all kinds, and the dislocation caused by demobilisation. The main part of the film consisted of interviews with Cabinet ministers, each one outlining their programme and the difficulties they were trying to overcome. The sequence on housing was described like this:

a screen interview with Aneurin Bevan in which he will describe briefly the appalling difficulties faced by the Government.....When Aneurin Bevan talks of the results so far achieved we can, of course, show bomb damaged houses in repair and repaired, rows and rows of pre-fabricated houses already occupied by families, and more permanent building going on in different parts of the country. This will lead us to the problem of building new towns and to a short comment by Lewis Silkin on the sites so far chosen and the plans for development.⁶⁴

Groves anticipated the politically sensitive nature of his proposal, but felt that the film 'would not be party propaganda':

By treating the subject as an impartial account of how a new Government takes office and how the machinery of government works, we should avoid any obviously direct propaganda and make our film with the widest possible public appeal.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Film scenario by Reg Groves of 'The Labour Governments Record', 1946, pp. 4-5, MSS 172/RG/1/1, Modern Records Centre (MRC).

⁶⁵ Reg Groves scenario p. 2.

Initially the proposal was well received, and Morgan Phillips of the Labour Party, Francis Williams, and Robert Frazer, Director General of the COI, were all keen.⁶⁶ However, when the idea was put to the Lord President, Herbert Morrison, it was rejected.⁶⁷ Robert Frazer's obvious embarrassment in his apologetic reply to Groves, suggests that this was for political or ideological reasons, rather than the practical ones he offered. Frazer's paraphrase of Morrison's comments is telling. Morrison was grateful for Groves suggestion, but was doubtful 'whether a film along the lines you suggest would be an appropriate addition to the central offices film programme'.⁶⁸ Reg Groves replied that 'there is no doubt at all that had this proposal come forward when a Conservative government was in office very few of our people would have objected to it'.⁶⁹

In some cases Labour cabinet ministers almost seemed to have had a puritanical aversion to using film propaganda. During Labour's first year in power, Movietone news approached the government to get Aneurin Bevan to appear in a newsreel it was filming about the housing shortage. The Labour Party's press officer, Arthur Bax, had managed to persuade it to film the story (much to his surprise), with a script which sympathetically outlined the government's housing policy. The script explains that the government is committed to expending most of its resources on building homes for rent. Moreover, this was occurring without recourse to private enterprise, which had 'failed to provide housing for those that need them most and in the period of most scarcity'.⁷⁰ Bax saw this

⁶⁶ Francis Williams had edited the Daily Herald in the war and became Clem Attlee's PR adviser in 1945. Robert Frazer was the Director General of the COI.

⁶⁷ Herbert Morrison was responsible for co-ordinating domestic policy and chaired the Cabinet Home Information Services (official) Committee.

⁶⁸ Robert Frazer (COI) to Reg Groves, 15 May 1947, MSS 172/RG/1/1-13, MRC.

⁶⁹ MSS 172/RG/1/1-13, MRC.

⁷⁰ PRO HLG 108/6 Script for Movietone news item on government housing policy. Undated, probably December 1945.

as a great opportunity for the Labour Government to exploit a news medium which had never been available to the Party before, and one that could grab the public's attention even more effectively than the press or radio.⁷¹ He was therefore very keen to give the item authenticity by including the appearance of the Minister. However, despite his repeated badgering, Bevan remained aloof, largely because he believed it was not the 'job' of a government minister to appear in a propaganda film:

No. I have thought this over again and I am sure I am right not to do it. The public do not want to see me they want to see houses; when I have given them all the houses they want I will do as many Movietone interviews as you like; in fact you can have a film of my funeral if you like.⁷²

The Labour government's ambiguous attitude to film created confusion for the COI in its approach to reconstruction. During early discussions for the film on 'Why New Towns' members of the MOTCP expressed concern that in a government sponsored film featuring a judicial enquiry into a new town, the new town should be the only outcome.⁷³

This problem arose again when the COI was proposing making a ten minute publicity film on the New Towns Act. The MOTCP questioned whether it was right to make a publicity film on the advantages of a specific aspect of government policy.⁷⁴ The COI replied that there was no problem using funds to produce publicity on a specific aspect of government policy, once it had become law. It added the assurance that 'every

⁷¹ PRO HLG 108/6 Letter from Arthur Bax (Labour Party HQ) to Aneurin Bevan (MOH), 8 January 1946.

⁷² PRO HLG 108/6 Letter from Aneurin Bevan (MOH) to Arthur Bax, 10 January 1946.

⁷³ PRO HLG 90/34 Tennant (MOTCP) to Dobbie (MOTCP), 27 July 1946.

⁷⁴ PRO HLG 90/36 MOTCP to COI, 21 October 1946.

care will, of course, be taken during the course of production of these films to eliminate any slant of a party political character'.⁷⁵ But officials at the MOTCP remained concerned with this issue. Geoffrey Whiskard and a colleague were so concerned about the lack of distinction between appropriate information and propaganda (which they felt made them vulnerable to criticism) that they applied to the Minister for some guidelines. Whiskard complained that this issue seemed to be a perennial problem: 'This was a constant difficulty in housing work where several films were mooted, and I never knew what the official line was supposed to be'.⁷⁶

The demotion in status of the MOI to COI was accompanied by more rigorous control of the organisation's activities by the Treasury. But in contrast to the MOI days, the Treasury also became responsible for the COI's administrative matters such as staffing and efficiency. It was particularly zealous in its supervision of the Films Division, which had under the MOI often been regarded as a profligate section. Now Films Division had to gain Treasury approval for every film project proposed. The Treasury often appeared a conservative and unimaginative institution and felt perfectly justified in denying funding to a project of which it did not approve. And, as we have seen, the Treasury temporarily withheld consent for the colour cartoon about new towns because of the legal wranglings over the Stevenage scheme.⁷⁷ Treasury objections also stood in the way of another film that the MOTCP and the COI were keen to make on the history of people's impact on the landscape. The COI wanted *The Changing Face of Britain* to be a quality, 30-40 minute theatrical release, to rival the best wartime

⁷⁵ PRO HLG 90/36 Sendall (COI) to Dobbie (MOTCP), 23 October 1946.

⁷⁶ HLG 90/35 Geoffrey Whiskard (MOTCP) to the secretary, 18 January 1947.

⁷⁷ PRO HLG 90/34 E.Mosbacher (MOTCP) to Ronald Tritton (director of COI Films Division), 1 March 1947.

documentaries. Ronald Tritton, the Director of Films Division, thought it would ‘lift people’s eyes from the fish queues to something more lasting, more beautiful’.⁷⁸

Although it was an historical survey of the British landscape, it was designed to help promote current government reconstruction policy:

[it] would appeal to the imagination and offer hope
for the future in a Britain of drabness and austerity;
and it would show that intelligent
planning can prevent the ugliness which has
accompanied industrial development.⁷⁹

Despite the attractiveness of such a film, the Treasury did not feel that the £16,000 project was worthwhile, as it was of no relevance to the ‘day-to day work’ of the Ministry and did not provide any special information for the public. Given the Treasury's intransigence, the COI took the case to the Home Information Services Committee for a final decision. No outcome is recorded in the files, but as the film was never made it is likely that the Cabinet committee supported the Treasury view.

The Treasury was particularly unhappy about any changes in the original plans for a production which would require money. In these circumstances money was often not released quickly enough to keep a production up to schedule.⁸⁰ This particular problem led the Films Division to try to get the Treasury to authorise expenditure on blocks of films.⁸¹ In general the Treasury seemed to hold the opinion that much of the COI's work was an extravagance.

⁷⁸ PRO MH 79/578 Note by the COI, ‘Proposed Film on the Changing Face of Britain’, in Minutes of the Home Information Services (Official) Committee, 1 September 1947.

⁷⁹ PRO MH 79/578 ‘Proposed Film on the Changing Face of Britain’, 1 September 1947.

⁸⁰ Bert Hogenkamp, 1991 thesis, p. 64.

⁸¹ Minutes of Films Sub-Committee of Economic Information Unit, 1 June 1948. Helen Forman Papers.

The national economic crisis of the summer of 1947 and the budget cuts which characterised the rest of Attlee's government hit the COI and especially Films Division, hard. For example when demands were made on the COI to make cuts in its budget for 1949-50, the estimate for film production was halved.⁸² This frugal atmosphere also affected the type of films that could be produced. In 1948-9 the Treasury demanded that publicity should only be produced which had an 'action point' or was likely to contribute directly to economic recovery, and threatened to refuse funding for film projects which did not follow these guidelines. As Robert Frazer argued, such a requirement was potentially 'stultifying if applied to the film'.⁸³ After 1947 a number of projects on town planning were dropped because of these new guidelines. For example, when a Treasury official was questioning a proposed film on Scottish fisheries research, he also queried the 'direct' propaganda value of some other productions for 1949-50, including 'several of the town and country planning films'.⁸⁴ When RIBA lobbied the MOTCP to make a film on the new town and country planning legislation it was told, confidentially, that although the Ministry had been considering a similar project itself for some time, it was unlikely to be realised, largely because of cost.⁸⁵

Fear of the Treasury was one of the considerations behind the various debates, mentioned above, about the appropriate nature of the publicity films. For example,

⁸² William Crofts, *Coercion or Persuasion? :Propaganda in Britain after 1945*, (1989), p. 231.

⁸³ PRO MH 79/597 Minutes of the Home Information Service (official), Films Programme Sub-Committee, meeting of 13 April 1949.

⁸⁴ PRO INF 12/134 Film Production Policy in Relation to Direct and Indirect Information, D.O'Donovan (Treasury) to D.B.Woodburn (COI), 8 April 1949.

⁸⁵ Minutes of the Films, Broadcasting and T.V. Sub-Committee, meeting of 6 December 1949, 11.1.7, RIBA Archive.

Bernard Sendall⁸⁶ who was the Controller of the Home division of the COI, was particularly concerned to establish whether or not a publicity film on new towns could be produced, before the proposal was submitted for Treasury approval.⁸⁷

The Labour Government's decision to give the COI the status of a public relations agency had a great impact on the production of film. Films were now, even more than during the war years, heavily influenced by the views and actions of the sponsoring ministries. As the records show, ministries responsible for the built environment took a very active involvement in relevant films. It was typical that during the early planning stages for the Stevenage historical film, one of the first decisions was that a committee, composed of representatives from the MOTCP and the Stevenage Development Corporation, was required to guide the film.⁸⁸ Normally public relations officers of sponsoring agencies oversaw film productions, liaising with the appropriate COI Production Controlling Officer (PCO). However, in some cases Ministers even intervened. When the publicity film on new towns was being prepared (eventually *New Town*), the Minister of Town and Country Planning requested a discussion directly with the scriptwriter.⁸⁹ As this incident reveals, the sponsoring ministries had a high level of involvement in productions and, as will be seen in the following chapter, firm ideas about how they wanted an issue portrayed. This degree of involvement created problems for the Films Division and threatened the quality and quantity of its output. In 1947 Helen de Mouilpied detailed the bureaucratic impediments to speedy production:

⁸⁶ Bernard Sendall was a civil servant. From 1941-45 he was the Principal Private Secretary to the Minister of Information; Controller (Home) COI, 1946-49; Controller Festival of Britain Office, 1949-51; Assistant Secretary, Admiralty, 1951-55.

⁸⁷ PRO HLG 90/36 New Towns - Long-Term Historical Film, meeting of 21 October 1946.

⁸⁸ PRO HLG 90/36 Forman (COI) to Blake, 29 July 1946.

⁸⁹ PRO HLG 90/34 George Stephenson to Mosbacher, 6 February 1947.

today every script has to be approved by the customer department, sometimes more than one....
..Then it has got to go to the experts as well, who may be anywhere in Britain, may not be government servants and are busily engaged in their own work
....delay between approval of treatment and commission of shooting scripts varies from 1-3 months.⁹⁰

Helen de Mouilpied's suggestion was that these problems could be alleviated by a return to MOI practices, where there had been a rule 'that no shooting script should ever be sent to a customer department except on the case of a specialised film'. This, she added, would 'shorten the waiting time between shooting - script approval and budget approval'.⁹¹

As we have seen many short film-makers welcomed the Labour election victory and expected to have a key role in producing information and propaganda films. However, after the war documentary film-makers had few links with the Labour government, indeed few important links with the labour movement as a whole. This limited the effectiveness of their various attempts to lobby for the unfettered use by the state of propaganda film.⁹²

During the war the most politically radical film-makers had tended to work for the independent film units who supplemented the work of Crown. Under the COI the contractors still had a lot of work, but more and more contracts were passed on to Crown,

⁹⁰ Government Film Production and Finance, 14 August 1947, Forman Papers.

⁹¹ Government Film Production and Finance, 14 August 1947, Forman Papers.

⁹² Bert Hogenkamp, thesis, Chapter 2, especially pp. 40-50.

which tended to be given the projects that were the most prestigious and considered the trickiest to produce.⁹³ It was also easier to control the spending of Crown productions than those conducted by independents.

There was a stricter ethos at Films Division under the COI. Although historians have overstated the degree of autonomy experienced by the documentary film makers at the MOI, there is no doubt that they had less clout at the COI. Ronald Tritton who had moved from head of the Army Film Unit to Director of Films Division, took a much tougher line than his predecessor, Jack Beddington, and was an unpopular appointment with documentary film makers.⁹⁴ From Tritton's recollections one concludes that documentary film-makers could no longer be indulged as 'money became extremely tight'.⁹⁵ Unfortunately for Tritton some of them tended to blame him for their lack of film commissions. There was also a political dimension to the campaign against him: 'They had wanted to change the world and they hadn't.....I was about the only Tory in a left-wing world, they made my life very difficult and I had a very unhappy period at the COI'.⁹⁶ However, when some 'documentarists' lobbied to have him replaced, their pleas were ignored. In general documentary figures have always complained that the post-war set up at Films Division was bureaucratic, unimaginative and generally restrictive of their talents. This view should be balanced with those of the officials at Films Division who often regarded the senior documentary makers as extravagant, unreliable and, most

⁹³ Forman, 14732/3 reel 1.

⁹⁴ Before the war Ronald Tritton had worked in public relations at a large hotel. During the war he was appointed head of the Army Film Unit, where he built an effective organisation against much initial military suspicion. Among the Unit's successes were *Desert Victory* (1943) and the Anglo/American production *True Glory* (1945). After the war he became director of the British Council's Films Division for a short time before taking on the same post at the COI. The rest of his career was at BP.

⁹⁵ Recorded interview with Ronald Tritton, IWM Sound Archives, accession no. 4626/3, reel 3,.

⁹⁶ Tritton, 4626/3, reel 3.

damning of all, creatively old fashioned. One anonymous official even wrote a poem satirising their outmoded approach to film-making:

Cries of Old Bermondsey

Who'll buy my lavender, beautiful lavender?
Please have my lavender do.....
It smells of Old Grierson, B.Wright and George
Pearson,
It's flavoured with Beddington too.

Please have my lavender, beautiful lavender,
Cut by MacAllister's hand.....
There's jitter and static, but still I'm emphatic
The message it brings you is grand.

Who'll have my lavender, beautiful lavender,
Ten wobbly dissolves and a wipe.....
Each blurry dictator inspired Monty Slater
To mumble rude words through his pipe. [and so on]⁹⁷

Because of the increased financial constraints applied to film-making at the COI, Production Control Officers (PCOs) and other officials had to take a tough line with film-makers. However, some of the new civil servants were by character a good deal stricter than those who had worked at the MOI. The PCOs Denis Forman and Philip Mackie had spent the war in the army. Although they were both keen on film (Forman had for a while been a scriptwriter with the Army Kinematograph Service), they were disciplinarians who had no patience with producers who went over budget.⁹⁸ Forman even threatened to make one producer pay an overspend out of his own pocket.

⁹⁷ Held a in file called 'Production 1943', Forman Papers.

⁹⁸ Forman, 14732/3, reel 1.

Ironically, although the Labour Party was now in power, some of the officials appointed to run the COI were not particularly tolerant of radical views. Forman's recollections are again informative. He believed that at the COI he was representative of a section of civil servants who supported the Labour government but thought 'the world was going left fast enough'.⁹⁹ This perspective brought him into direct conflict with radical film-makers who he believed were trying to insert left-wing ideas that were not relevant. Moreover, Forman, having fought in the army, was extremely sensitive to any line of propaganda, however, well disguised.¹⁰⁰ He believed that some film-makers such as Ralph Bond, Budge Cooper and Donald Alexander of DATA were basically communist fellow travellers. During one argument about left-wing material in a film, an un-named film-maker defended his position to Forman by stating that the triumph of European communism was inevitable.¹⁰¹ In another battle about 'fellow travelling elements' in a film, with John Taylor, then head of Crown, Forman insisted on having a more public show-down in front of the Director General.¹⁰² These recollections are not hysteria on Forman's part as a number of film-makers in Britain were Communist Party members or sympathetic to Communism. What is interesting about his recollections is the active attempts by civil servants to block those film-makers who attempted to introduce what was regarded as left-wing propaganda.

Despite his endeavours, Forman believes that a number of small unacceptable elements still passed into films, because other PCOs did not notice them or thought they were too insignificant. He particularly recalls the film *History of Housing* (1946), where

⁹⁹ Forman, 14732/3, reel 2.

¹⁰⁰ Forman, 14732/3, reel 2.

¹⁰¹ Forman, 14732/3, reel 2.

¹⁰² Forman, 14732/3, reel 2.

Paul Rotha deliberately introduced references to poverty and slum conditions experienced by the servants living in Victorian houses: ‘social propaganda’ which he felt was ‘totally irrelevant’.¹⁰³

Jacquetta Hawkes interest was to show in a scholarly fashion how the house had developed over what twelve centuries in Britain. And of course that was our view, my own and Helen’s [de Mouilpied] view. But it was quite typical of the Rotha outlook that even houses were meat for some sort of social message of that kind.¹⁰⁴

Sponsored by the Department of Education, the film was one element of a new ‘visual unit’ on the subject to be supplied to teachers in schools and further education. In the end, probably due to these official objections, Rotha was only able to make some fairly minor references to social conditions. For example, when describing the regency architecture of Cheltenham, the commentator remarked: ‘it is as well to remember that the many servants needed to run such houses had to live in dark basements and to sleep in attics’.¹⁰⁵

Well of course Rotha’s approach towards it was to show the house as visible evidence of society’s, of the failures of society really. The house demonstrated how unfair society had been throughout the ages.¹⁰⁶

Conclusion

The reputation of film as a communicator and effective motor of change was greatly enhanced by its wartime use. In Britain it was thought that there would be widespread use of documentary film to assist with various aspects of post-war

¹⁰³ Forman, 14732/3 , reel 2.

¹⁰⁴ Forman, 14732/3, reel 3. Jacquetta Hawkes was also a member of RIBA’s Films, Broadcasting and T.V. Sub-Committee.

¹⁰⁵ PRO INF 6/91 Script for *Houses in History*, Seven League Productions, 8 January 1946, p. 3.

¹⁰⁶ Forman interview, reel 3.

reconstruction. In relation to the built environment, the particular problems of rebuilding Britain seemed an area particularly suited to film. Film would be needed to provide practical instruction to builders and architects and to inform people about housing policy. A significant suggestion was that film could be used to encourage popular participation in planning proposals. The calls for this use of film became more urgent as planners and politicians became aware that the people were becoming disillusioned with planning and planners. By 1949 some civil servants involved with film production were looking at film projects which could help to alleviate this problem.

It was assumed that a progressive Labour Government would make widespread and imaginative use of film. In relation to the theme of the built environment, the government did use film widely, but its programme was much more pragmatic and less visionary than had been hoped. The enormous problems facing the government's reconstruction programme called for films that addressed practical needs or, bluntly, sold an aspect of policy. When film producers and civil servants attempted to produce more imaginative and less functional films, they were prevented by financial constraints arising out of the enhanced position of the Treasury and the more general financial problems of the government. However, one of the most striking aspects of official film production was its political conservatism, due largely to a governmental wish to appear responsible.

Chapter Six: Central Government Housing and Planning Films, 1946-51.

The change from war to peace brought its challenge to all branches of government publicity. No longer was there a national “cause”, different sections of the community were apt to have their own ideas of the common weal. Interest in the nations affairs dropped, the horse no longer galloped up to the fount of information, it had to be led. War and all it entails is the very stuff of film, white papers are not. Social and economic legislation, even if packed with latent drama, are not easy film subjects. There is nothing to shoot until the buildings go up.¹

The previous chapter has explained how government films on the built environment were produced in the first six years of peace. In particular it has outlined some of the political and bureaucratic difficulties and constraints experienced by film-makers and officials producing films on housing and planning. But as the above quotation reveals, post-war government propagandists also faced a problem of reception in presenting reconstruction to the public. This chapter will examine how official film-makers tried to overcome the people’s disinterest in policy on reconstruction and the images of housing and planning presented in the films proposed and released. From 1946 to 1951 fifteen films were produced through the COI on issues of the built environment. Ten of these were aimed at the general public to explain and promote the government’s policy of town planning, new towns, house building and related issues. The others such as *Care and Maintenance of Building Plant* (1950), *A Plan to Work On* (1948) and *The Task Before the Building Industry* (1950) were made primarily for builders, architects, planners and local politicians, to assist them with the actual task of re-building Britain. During this period a further eight or nine films were planned to be released to the general public on new towns (two) town and country planning (three), the

¹ PRO INF 6/1349 *New Town*, press release, 5 March 1947.

current difficulties and policies of reconstruction and house building (two). Civil Servants at the COI and the Ministry of Town and Country Planning (hereafter MOTCP) thought that new towns were so important that three films would be needed. 'Stevenage I' was to record the growth and development of an actual new town², 'Stevenage II' ('Why and How New Towns'), to explain the principles and history of the new town idea, and a third to tackle the human and moral dimension of new towns.

New towns had also captured the imagination of many politicians and civil servants who believed that they could be the ideal environment in which to create Labour's new society. In contrast to the rather staid conservative values of the TCPA and the 'Garden Cities' of Welwyn and Letchworth, Labour's vision of a new town combined a class melting pot with a politically and socially active body of citizens. As a consequence there is a sense of millennial grandeur about some of the projects, particularly 'Stevenage I' which was to record the history of the town over ten to twelve years. The COI described the project as 'a unique film with an authentic epic quality which has never been achieved on the screen'. There was even a suggestion to make the film in Technicolor.³ Bernard Sendall, Homes controller of the COI, when agreeing to the MOTCP's formal request for the film, remarked that 'it should be an essential part of the work of the Films Division to make films dealing with the big social and industrial events of our times'.⁴

² PRO HLG 90/36 Stephen Tallents (MOTCP) to Ralph Keene (Green Park Productions), 15 April 1946.

³ PRO HLG 90/36 Denis Forman, Films Division (COI) to Blake, 28 July 1946.

⁴ PRO HLG 90/36 Bernard Sendall, Homes Controller (COI) to Valentine (MOTCP), 27 September 1946.

The main aim of the films was to promote the idea of new towns both to potential inhabitants from the old cities and to people already living in proposed new town areas. A related aim was to explain the concepts of the neighbourhood units and central redevelopment, which were elements common to all planning proposals.

As indicated by the quotation at the top of this chapter, new town publicists needed to find a new form to stimulate the imagination of people who had become jaded by wartime propaganda. A more practical problem was the lack of reconstruction to shoot. During the planning of 'How and Why New Towns', Eric Mosbacher said that it was to be more than the familiar documentary film on planning theory, it also had to 'sell the idea of the new town's attractiveness'.⁵ In order to achieve these aims it was felt that this film had to get away from what had become a clichéd treatment, even though with a lack of building actually taking place, post-war film-makers were as restricted as war-time producers who had worked on this theme.

Why new towns and how presents a more difficult problem. It will follow on the tail of several similar films, *Proud City*, *Land of Promise*, *The Road to Loch Lomond*, the film about Plymouth and others, and although what it has to say is quite distinct from the message of any of its predecessors, the visuals will depend largely on the same resources, maps, models and shots of towns such as Welwyn Garden City. We are handling a type of film which is becoming dangerously threadbare; and we agree entirely with your view that if it is made at all the film must be a thoroughly satisfying production.⁶

Stephen Tallents agreed with Denis Forman that the usual approach to the subject was now boring, singling out '*Proud City* and *Land of Promise* as cautionary tales'.⁷

⁵ PRO HLG 90/34 Eric Mosbacher, Information Officer (MOTCP) to Gordon Stephenson, 12 March 1947.

⁶ PRO HLG 90/36 Denis Forman to Stephen Tallents (MOTCP), 6 June 1946.

After rejecting several other treatments which were considered ‘too ordinary’ the COI and MOTCP decided upon an imaginative and original ‘court’ treatment of the subject,⁸ in which a fictional trial was staged between ‘Mr John Smith’ of Stevenage and the Development Corporation, which was planning to demolish his house to make way for the new town. The principal characters of the trial were highly symbolic caricatures. The plaintiff, Smith, was described in a demeaning fashion, as ‘Strube’s little man [the archetypal Daily Express reader]⁹, complete with pince-nez and umbrella’.¹⁰ The defendant was ‘a man-sized scroll of parchment....bound with a ribbon at the waist sitting in considerable trepidation. The words New Towns Act 1946 Clause 2, Development Corporation can be seen on his chest’.¹¹ The other principal actors in the trial were also humorous, for example the judge was ‘modelled on Beachcomber’s Lord Justice Cocklecarrot’. The proceedings were equally comic, the instructions were that it should:

unfold in an atmosphere of a grave extravaganza. The more fantastical the proceedings the more decorous the demeanour of the players, the ruthless logic of the argument consistently being allowed first place. All anomalies should be accepted in the spirit of a shaggy dog story’.¹²

In the past films had tried to give a sense of what new towns might be like by re-using ‘library’ sequences of Welwyn Garden City or of L.C.C. ‘garden city style’ estates

⁷ PRO HLG 90/36 Tallents marginalia on Forman to Tallents, 6 June 1946.

⁸ PRO HLG 90/36 Forman to P.H.Black (MOTCP), 19 July 1946.

⁹ Strube’s ‘Little Man’, was a cartoon character drawn by the English cartoonist Sidney Strube, who was supposed to symbolise the average Daily Express reader. Strube (1891-1956) was the Express cartoonist from 1910 to 1946.

¹⁰ ‘Suggested Treatment for a film to answer the questions Why New Towns ? How New Towns ? (Stevenage II)’, p. 1, 4/20/33, Donald Alexander and Budge Cooper Papers, Scottish Film Archive.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

on London's fringes.¹³ The writers of 'Stevenage II' tried a more fantastic approach. In order to describe the features of a neighbourhood unit, for example, they created a scene in which the judge and counsels were reduced to tiny animated figures, and arranged in discussion around a doll's-house size model of a unit, complete with six houses and a civic centre.

The idea adopted for the third film, 'An Englishman's Home', was a particularly bold solution to the difficulty of portraying the new towns before a brick had been laid. For the first half of the film the only visuals were of the beautiful countryside setting of the new town. The audience and the potential new town dwellers in the film (a professional man, a factory worker, a group of teenagers and a harassed mother with her children) were invited by the unseen architect to imagine what the town would be like by listening to the ambient sounds which describe a day in the new town.

To overcome people's suspicion of new towns there was an emphasis on human and social development. For example in 'Stevenage I' it was suggested that the film's narrative follow the life of a family which had moved to Stevenage from a house that was due to be demolished in an inner city. The family's acceptance and progress in the new town was to be reinforced with organic symbols such as including a 10-12 year old girl in the family:

for whom can be forecast the strong possibility of an early marriage and motherhood. The sense of a new generation would be invaluable, similarly, serial shots of a bitch, puppies and her broods, growing trees, hedges etc. to vividly punctuate passages of the family diary might be

¹³ Two good examples of this are Matthew Nathan's *Housing Progress* (1937) and the British Council film *Development of the English Town* (1943).

used ? ¹⁴

When the location for the film was moved from Stevenage to Peterlee in April 1948 there was a reaffirmation of this approach when it was stated that the six year film coverage, should ‘portray what is happening to peoples’ lives. One might go as far as to say that the material aspect of construction will be subsidiary to the consequent reorientation of the whole outlook of the whole population’. ¹⁵

A related theme was that the people should not be seen to be coerced into moving to new towns. During the discussion for ‘Peterlee’ in December 1948 it was suggested that the town be shown to have it’s origins in the ‘minds of “local people” instead of the in-trays of a Minister’. ¹⁶ In other words, Peterlee was not to be portrayed as a ‘gargantuan plan imposed on an unwilling people but as the direct development of their own idea’. ¹⁷ Similarly, one of the main concerns about the script for ‘An Englishman’s Home’ was that it implied that people would be forced to move from a ‘suffering stormy metropolis’ to the new town.

There is a tendency on the part of some people to imagine that it is the intention of the government to remove people forcibly on the pattern of Hitler and the foreign labour employed in Germany before and during the war. Those words might perhaps lend colour to that view and I would rather hear the architect speak about giving people an opportunity etc. ¹⁸

¹⁴ PRO HLG 90/36 John Rowden’s Crown Film Unit Plan for the Stevenage historical film, 23 January 1947.

¹⁵ PRO HLG 90/36 Meeting at MOTCP on the Peterlee Film, John Mumford (MOTCP), Mrs Felton (Vice Chair of the Stevenage Development Corporation), N. Arthur, and John Hyde (COI Films Division), 14 December 1948.

¹⁶ PRO HLG 90/36 A suggestion by Mrs Felton at a meeting to discuss the Peterlee film, 14 December 1948.

¹⁷ PRO HLG 90/36 Mrs Felton, at the Meeting on the ‘Peterlee film’, 14 December 1948.

¹⁸ PRO HLG 90/35 Tennant, New Towns Division (MOTCP), 8 February 1947.

Instead new towns were portrayed as the product of the peoples will. For example, in the ‘trial’ of the New Towns Act, when the moment came for the foreman of the jury to announce their decision he turned to face the camera and spoke directly to the audience: ‘Oh no, I’m not going to give the verdict for you. You have heard the case fairly and truly tried, and now turning over the evidence in your minds, each one of you must go home and reach a verdict for himself’.¹⁹ The second half of John Rowden’s treatment for ‘An Englishman’s Home’ was a debate between a group of ordinary people who are for and against the proposed new town. The film was to end with a teenage girl looking to the camera and out to the audience for their answer. This approach to planning reflected both a commitment by the MOTCP to democratic planning methods and an attempt to diminish the role of planners. During the script discussions for ‘An Englishman’s Home’ readers liked the fact that the film’s leading character was an architect, but were concerned when he was identified as a planner in the treatment.

The tragedy is that at the moment there is nothing to refute the popular cry that “planners have led us nowhere”. In terms of titles “planners” are much maligned; architects aren’t. I would suggest using the word plan, planners and planning as sparingly as possible in the actual film.²⁰

Mosbacher’s actual suggestion to Forman was that the:

architect should not be a superior person whose mission in life is to tell people what is good for them. We take it that Mr.Rowden intends the function of the architect in the film to be that of an expert impartially holding the scales. He should we think point to examples of people who “think they are contented” and leave the audience to judge for themselves’.²¹

¹⁹ Treatment for Stevenage II, p. 4, 4/20/33, Scottish Film Archive (SFA).

²⁰ PRO HLG 90/35 D.Twist, 10 April 1947.

²¹ PRO HLG 90/35 Mosbacher to Forman, 16 April 1947.

Overcoming the objections of locals to new towns required a subtle approach that was complicated by the battle over Stevenage. Ironically, the ‘fantasy treatment’ for ‘Stevenage II’ had to be abandoned in August 1946, when the plot was mirrored in real life and Stevenage Town Council actually took the Minister Lewis Silkin to court.²²

Forman and Rowden favoured using moral persuasion to overcome the opposition to new towns. To do this they took Strube’s case against the new town in the abandoned ‘Court’ film, and made it the central theme of ‘An Englishman’s Home’.²³ By exploring the challenge that the creation of new towns presented to the rights of the individual, Forman hoped the film would ‘put the problem on a higher plane than that of planners versus inhabitants, and by doing so would open the eyes of the public to the bigger issues at stake in the execution of the Town and County Planning Act’.²⁴

It proposes to treat the underlying policy of town planning showing the conflict between “the Englishman’s home is his castle” and the “greatest happiness for the greatest number”. The brief is in fact, to make the point that you cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs, and that some people must suffer inconvenience if better homes are to be built for the majority. It would also try to bridge the gulf between the planner and the people, showing that the former is not a little tin god sitting up in Whitehall, but is an expert human being whose job it is to construct the sort of towns that will make other human beings happier.²⁵

While Rowden and Forman wanted to confront the new town objectors head on, civil servants at the MOTCP and MOH desired a more conciliatory approach. Thus a general criticism of Rowden’s first treatment was that it would show that new towns

²² Letter from Forman to Miss Budge Cooper, DATA Ltd, 12 August 1946, 4/20/33, SFA.

²³ ‘Suggested Treatment for a film to answer the questions Why New Towns ? How New Towns ? (Stevenage II), p. 2, 4/20/33, Donald Alexander and Budge Coooper papers, SFA.

²⁴ PRO HLG 90/35 Forman to Mosbacher, 15 January 1947.

²⁵ PRO HLG 90/35 Forman to Mosbacher, 29 January 1947.

were to be populated by slum dwellers. As Tennant remarked to Dobbie, this would be particularly dangerous as one of the main objections expressed by the inhabitants of new town areas was a fear of being ‘swamped by a lot of people with dirty habits and no manners’.²⁶ Thus Mosbacher reminded Forman that:

One of our strongest planks is that new town populations will consist of people of all types, and we want to draw attention, if we can, not only to overcrowding of people in buildings, but also to the overcrowding of the buildings on the land.²⁷

The misgivings that MOTCP officials had with Rowden’s treatment can partly be explained by the public reaction to the events at Stevenage. As Twist pointed out, the town was on ‘everyone’s lips’ and audiences will be identifying the Ministry wholly with the town. Therefore they wanted to play down aspects of the treatment that portrayed the new town objectors as negative and damning.²⁸

A related criticism was that the film could stir up ‘class hatred’ by showing that the creation of new towns to achieve the happiness of the majority would entail the sacrifice of a privileged few. Civil servants at the MOTCP did not want it to appear that they regarded the privileged ‘business class’ as the ‘natural enemies’ of new towns.²⁹ Mosbacher commented to Forman, that although ‘The picture of conflicting interests’ was ‘not so very inaccurate.....I don’t think we want a “class war” film’.³⁰ Tennant took a similar line, arguing that this picture was truthful but ‘it would be unfortunate for a government film to take the form proposed since it would tend to stir up class hatred’.

²⁶ PRO HLG 90/35 Tennant to Dobbie (MOTCP), 11 April 1947.

²⁷ PRO HLG 90/35 Mosbacher to Forman, 16 April 1947.

²⁸ PRO HLG 90/35 D.Twist, 10 April 1947.

²⁹ PRO HLG 90/35 Unidentified to Mosbacher, 15 April 1947.

³⁰ PRO HLG 90/35 Mosbacher to Forman, 16 April 1947, p. 4.

Rather than choosing a member of the ‘fortunate few to represent the vested interest of local landowners’ he suggested ‘Strube’s little man who has saved up and bought his house’.³¹

Instead civil servants preferred this film and others to show the people making their minds up on the basis of rational choices. Mosbacher warned Forman that they should not be seen to be attacking the ‘Englishman’s sacred home’. The MOTCP were its defenders, the point being that ‘the Englishman will have a far better home in a planned neighbourhood unit than an unplanned Edgware or Watford’.³² Later he suggested a more moderate line would be to show that although new towns brought ‘the opportunities that were the monopoly of the privileged few. The verdict on new towns is a verdict of simple arithmetic’.³³ To reinforce this point he suggested that a business man be included in the film who had set up a factory in a new town and, as a result, experienced an upturn in production due to happier staff conditions.³⁴ Films that threatened to incite class conflict also ran counter to government publicity guidelines, ‘that the country was a closely knit team’.³⁵

Despite the potential of these proposed films in the end only *New Town (Charley)* was made. Some of the difficulties that beset these projects arose from the concerns (described in chapter five) about issuing propaganda. Philip Mackie’s objections to John Rowden’s first treatment suggests this. He described ‘Stevenage I’ as a ‘cavalcade of

³¹ PRO HLG 90/35 Tennant to Dobbie, 11 April 1947.

³² PRO HLG 90/35 Mosbacher to Forman, 16 January 1947.

³³ PRO HLG 90/35 Mosbacher to Forman, 16 April 1947.

³⁴ PRO HLG 90/35 Mosbacher to Forman, 16 April 1947.

³⁵ PRO MH 79/581 S.C.Leslie, Chairman of the Economic Information Committee, 12 June 1947.

English history, and Stevenage simply a convenient excuse for recording the story of a family and the social history of England from 1948-1960'.³⁶ In fact progress on all three new towns films was temporarily held up between the middle of January 1947 and March 1947, when the MOTCP's became concerned that they were sponsoring films which might be described as propaganda.³⁷

'Stevenage I/Peterlee' was also affected by the COI's financial constraints and the uneven development of new towns themselves. Therefore although the MOTCP remained keen on the project, by April 1950 John Hyde had to report that filming had still not started.³⁸ 'Peterlee' remained theoretically active until September 1950 but as the progress of development there was so slow, the project was transferred first to Crawley, then Hemel Hempstead and finally to Harlow. In fact, very little filming ever took place. As we will see in the next chapter the initiative for these projects then moved to the towns themselves with Crawley and Hemel particularly interested in making their own films of local development work.

'An Englishman's Home' did not prove popular with the Films Sub-committee of the Economic Information Unit who suspended the production in August 1947³⁹ and then in November abandoned it altogether.⁴⁰

³⁶ PRO HLG 90/36 Philip Mackie (COI) to Mosbacher, 16 September 1947.

³⁷ PRO HLG 90/35 Forman to Mosbacher, 15 January 1947.

³⁸ PRO HLG 90/36 John Hyde, Films Division (COI) to John Mumford (MOTCP), 6 April 1950.

³⁹ PRO MH 79/580 Minutes of the Films Sub-Committee of the Economic Information Committee, meeting of 5 August 1947.

⁴⁰ PRO MH 79/580 Minutes of the Films Sub-Committee, meeting of 15 November 1947.

Along with the belief that the format for films about new towns had become hackneyed, was an associated realisation that the people had become much less receptive to government publicity since the end of the war. Partly this was explained by the observation that the peoples' interests and concerns were no longer focused and united on one cause (i.e. military victory) and that instead they were becoming preoccupied with sectional concerns.⁴¹ Moreover, it was recognised that the business of 'reconstructing Britain' was dull and did not transfer well to film.

*New Town (Charley) (1947)*⁴²

For these reasons the COI had decided to try to animate government policy with a series of Charley cartoons⁴³: 'Many subjects of real importance which we wanted to include in the series were nothing but ideas still in the blueprint or white paper stage. Hence the need for a medium which could materialise the abstract, make pictures in the future and put flesh on any skeleton'.⁴⁴ Thus the first of the series, *New Town*, was devised to overcome the problem of presenting a planning subject without any 'live examples'.⁴⁵ During scripting it was decided to move away from a London focus to a version in which new towns were presented as a planning solution applicable to the problems of overcrowding in many cities. For example it was pointed out that they might also be built around isolated factories in the North East of England or even be used to replace derelict mining towns in Wales.⁴⁶ The MOTCP commenting on the first

⁴¹ PRO INF 6/1349 *New Town*, press release, 5 March 1947

⁴² *New Town (Charley) (1948)*, sp: COI for MOTCP, pc: Halas and Bachelor, dir: John Halas, Joy Bachelor, 10 mins.

⁴³ There were four cartoons in the *Charley* series: *New Town* (1947); *Charley's March of Time* (1948), to explain the National Insurance Acts of July 1948; *Charley Junior's Schooldays* (1949), to show what types of school were available; and *Charley's Black Magic* (1949), to explain the current high price of coal.

⁴⁴ PRO INF 6/1349 *New Town*, press release, 5 March 1947.

⁴⁵ PRO HLG 90/35 Forman to Mosbacher, 15 January 1947.

⁴⁶ PRO HLG 90/34 Forman to John Halas, 28 January 1947.

treatment prepared by the animators John Halas and Joy Bachelor, asked that more be done to promote the neighbourhood unit: 'the film should make everybody want to live in a neighbourhood unit'.⁴⁷ Another questioned whether the film should refer to the selfish reactions of the locals to a new town.⁴⁸

During the production of the film, Halas and Bachelor Cartoons asked the MOTCP for detailed factual information about the specifications of new towns such as the radius of the green belt, the kind of buildings to be shown, pedestrian routes and smoke control. Establishing the physical features and specifications of a new town proved easier than agreeing on the human characteristics of the archetypal new town dweller, particularly for 'Charley', the cartoon's front man. Because new towns were to be constructed nation-wide, he had to be a figure with which any audience could identify. As a result the producers could not decide whether to give Charley a north country accent or that of a southerner; eventually they chose a home counties voice. Charley's clothes presented a problem of class identity: 'if he didn't wear a tie the working man might take umbrage, if he did he was dangerously near the white collar worker. In the end a very plain tie was balanced by a boiler suite'.⁴⁹

From this description of Charley one can infer that the representative 'new townner' was a skilled member of the manual working-class, who probably worked in a supervisory role. The addition of a tie might also have been included to make Charley

⁴⁷ PRO HLG 90/34 Mosbacher to Gordon Stephenson, 5 February 1947.

⁴⁸ PRO HLG 90/34 E.A.Sharp (MOTCP) to Minister, 8 March 1947.

⁴⁹ PRO INF 6/1349 *New Town*, press release, 5 March 1947.

appear respectable and respectful, an image that ran counter to the worst expectations of the people who lived in the reception areas for new towns.

Despite the imaginative style of *New Town* it actually had a similar structure to previous films about town planning, moving from a discussion of the problems of the old town to a description of the features and virtues of new towns. The chief difference of this film, apart from its style, was the close involvement of the people in the design of the new town.

In the completed cartoon, Charley, who lives in a new town, is transported back to his unhappy days in an unplanned city. One day, fed up with the long journey to work and all the city's other problems he joins a group of like-minded citizens and, assisted by a judge, they create their new town. A key feature of the new town is the neighbourhood unit. At the end of the film, Charley now back in the new town, invites the audience to join him.

In *New Town (Charley)* the people have a paramount role. The message is that the people can change their own lives. They determine to redevelop their old town and improve their environment without any prompting from politicians or experts. The moment at which the disgruntled citizens simultaneously come together to change their town, is portrayed both literally and metaphorically as a leap of faith. Charley is joined by a group of like-minded citizens who float upwards, breaking through the roofs of their homes into the sky and descend to land around a table in a committee room. Depicting community participation in such a positive fashion shows how important this was

considered to be by the MOTCP. The people's involvement does not end here, as they are responsible for creating the blueprint for the new town. The committee draws up the plans for the new town through discussion and agreement, thus a new town is depicted as the natural and logical solution to the problems of town planning. A planner does not even appear, the only expert or official present is the judge, whose role is to invite the people's participation and guide the development of the town. When he suggests building high-rise flats in the old town, the idea is firmly rejected by the people and he quickly agrees to remove the skyscrapers. The people who create the new town are socially mixed, reflecting official intentions to attract all types of people to new towns and public housing, as well as overcoming the prejudices of those who lived in new town areas.

The propaganda purpose of this film may have backfired by frustrating those people who were desperate for housing. One man who had seen the film, responded to Charley's invitation by writing to the COI asking how he could apply to be moved to a new town. He and his family were currently lodging with relatives far from his workplace forcing him to get up at 5.30 every morning. He had tried unsuccessfully to get a home nearer work, so he was naturally interested in the idea of new towns. The frustrated and cynical tone of the man's letter indicates that he had little belief that this request would be rewarded.

I could be a good citizen in one of your "new towns" send me more details if you can- and I will endeavour "to try it sometime". If you cannot please omit these words from your next similar production, and save the people who are leg weary (looking for a place to live) and mind weary from groaning in the cinemas.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ PRO HLG 90/34 Letter from Kenneth Ross, Sidcup in Kent to the COI, 22 March 1948.

The letter caused great embarrassment for the Ministries concerned. When the COI passed it on to the MOTCP, they pointed out that their role had been to carry out the policy instructions of the Ministry not to find Mr Ross a home.⁵¹ Apart from the immediate difficulty of how to reply to Mr Ross, the MOTCP were concerned that they had overlooked a line in the film that could potentially create a great deal of distress.

The last thing we want at the present time is to stimulate a lot of enthusiasm from unfortunate people living in unsatisfactory conditions who will have to be damped down as soon as it shows itself. We may have to consider cutting the offending words or withdrawing the film altogether for the time being.⁵²

As to Mr Ross, fortunately for the MOTCP, as he lived in Sidcup rather than an inner London borough he was not eligible for a home in one of the new towns in the South East. Thus in their reply to Mr Ross, the point was made that the film was intended primarily for new towners from inner London. Of course this was not the case, as during production the film had deliberately been steered away from a London focus as new towns were part of a national programme. However, the reply did end on a more honest note.

I am afraid there is no chance of even the new town being built and made ready for occupation within a period which would help your own urgent problem. Even when it is built the allotment of a accommodation will almost certainly be a matter for whatever authority is entrusted with the town's accommodation.⁵³

Specialist opinion was divided on the film. The reviewer of the Town and Country Planning Journal thought the COI had produced a film that was patronising and

⁵¹ PRO HLG 90/34 Ronald Tritton, Director of Films Division to H.Twist (MOTCP), 22 March 1948.

⁵² PRO HLG 90/34 H.Twist to Tennant, 23 March 1948.

⁵³ PRO HLG 90/34 H.Twist to Mr Ross, 8 April 1948.

trivialised the most important issues. The reviewer particularly disliked Charley, who was ‘so appallingly smug that I would have enjoyed the film a lot better without him’. Interestingly he did not object to the use of a cartoon for this subject, which was potentially ‘excellent.....if used with elan and wit’.⁵⁴ The film appraisers at RIBA were, by contrast, very positive about the film.

The film has considerable entertainment value, and is well conceived and executed, the commentary is clear and lively. The novel form of technique coupled with an imaginative approach to the subject should help to convey to general audiences the broad principles of town planning.⁵⁵

Although the examples described above are the most fully developed, other new town films were also proposed as civil servants thought it was a subject which required wider coverage. But increasingly film-minded officials found that new towns were not being treated as a priority, and although projects were proposed and discussed little actual filming took place after 1948.

There were also plans to make films about the government’s general planning proposals. During the discussions for *New Town*, Mosbacher warned Forman that the proposed film was unbalanced as it only looked at new towns without any discussion of the ‘far bigger problem of planned redevelopment of existing cities’. He hoped that a film might be produced based on forthcoming books about the redevelopment of central and residential areas.⁵⁶ Eight government projects were planned between 1946-51 and five were realised: *Picture Paper* (1946), *Dover Spring* (1947), *A Plan to Work On* (1948), *This is Britain No. 35* (1949) on Oxford’s planning scheme and *The Glen is Ours*

⁵⁴ *Town and County Planning Journal*, 61 (1948).

⁵⁵ *RIBA Journal*, Review of Films, July (1948).

⁵⁶ PRO HLG 90/34 Mosbacher to Forman, 11 February 1947.

(1946). Of the projects that were dropped there are few details left, but it seems that most of them suffered because of changing priorities in film subjects due to the Treasury's insistence on films with an 'action point' and their apparent dislike of films on planning. As we have seen in chapter five, one of the first victims of this shift in policy was 'The Changing Face of Britain' which had ceased by the winter of 1947. Other related projects to be abandoned were 'Reconstruction of Blitzed Towns', which had been cut by the 23 February 1949; 'Why Plan Our Towns and Countryside' first proposed in October 1950; 'Development Plan' and 'Report on Clydeside' which were both proposed in November 1950. It is likely that the fate of these last two can be attributed to the termination of film production at the COI.⁵⁷ The existence of these projects is testimony to the fact that the COI and MOTCP continued to value the promotion of this subject despite the Treasury's efforts to shift the emphasis in film-making to purely informational films and economic topics.

As with the film on new towns, propaganda films about the reconstruction and redevelopment of existing towns emphasised the participation of the people in the planning process. The British Council film *Picture Paper* (1946) is one of the most successful and significant films of this group.⁵⁸ Ostensibly a film about the freedom of the press, a subject ideally suited to the Council's brief for overseas propaganda, *Picture Paper* provides valuable insight into contemporary attitudes to reconstruction and in particular how the people could be involved in this process. The film was sparked off by an article in Picture Post about the Max Lock survey and redevelopment plan for

⁵⁷ PRO MH 79/600 Minutes of the Home Information Services Committee (official), Film Programme Sub-Committee, meetings of 2 October 1950 and 3 November 1950.

⁵⁸ *Picture Paper* (1946), sp: British Council, pc: Horizon, dir: Erik Cripps, 19 mins.

Middlesborough which had been presented to the city's council in May 1945. Max Lock was a graduate of the Architectural Association who became involved in town planning. After the A.A. he had toured Sweden where he had been impressed by its architectural styles and welfare state policies. These influences, allied to his own Quaker humanitarianism, led him to develop a populist and participatory approach to architecture and planning. His admiration for the planner Patrick Geddes undoubtedly provided theoretical weight to this approach.

As a teacher at the A.A. and the Hull College of Art, he unusually allied himself with the students and encouraged them to develop a participatory and co-operative approach to architecture. In fact it was in alliance with the students that he developed a method of planning urban redevelopment which involved a close dialogue with and contribution from the local community involved. This approach was pioneered on a slum clearance scheme in 1939 for the L.C.C. at Ocean Street. Rather than simply demolishing the slums and re-housing the people, Lock and his students from the A.A. consulted and discussed the design of the new houses with the residents. To assist them with this sociological approach they were advised by Charles Madge of Mass Observation. A key element of the project was in publicising the finished proposals and making them accessible to the people. This included making a model of the resultant scheme, which they photographed, and in addition producing a scripted film of the residents. The project became the blueprint for much larger ones at Hull and Middlesborough.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ 'Max Lock 1909-1988: People and Planning. An Exhibition of his Life and Work'. A catalogue to the exhibition at the University of Westminster, 1997.

The success of the Hull plan, led to a commission from Middlesbrough to draw up a master plan for the redevelopment of the city. This was to be prepared as part of the city's requirements under the 1944 Town and County Planning Act, to present a redevelopment and modernisation plan. Lock and his team tried to encourage even more participation from locals in the preparation of the Middlesbrough survey and plan. Their survey techniques included door to door interviews, an open office in the town's centre, the distribution of 'Penny Pamphlets' on key aspects of the plan and survey, public meetings, and the involvement of local children in the collection of data on traffic and pollution. There was also widespread consultation with local clubs, societies, trade organisations and Ministry officials. The public exhibition for the plan was seen by 10,000 people each week, leading to the Picture Post article and eventually the film.

During the Middlesbrough project Lock explained that he was against planning that was conducted in isolation from the people, instead advocating an alliance between planners and the locals: 'Planning is a democratic process. As such, it can only work in a true democracy. Citizens, as the planners' clients, have a right to be consulted'.⁶⁰ He argued that without this input people who might have been co-operative were likely to object and be scared off, and in so doing destroy the plans objectives: 'The only plans people believe in are the plans they make themselves'. More pragmatically, he realised that without the assistance of the people, the information on which the planners based their plans was likely to be full of errors which would exasperate and ultimately alienate.

⁶⁰ Max Lock, 'Town Planning and Public Relations', Town and Country Planning, 55 (1946), p. 111.

‘Technocrats at the drawing boards by themselves are bound to fail. We are finding that these great problems require team work and continuous constructive zeal’.⁶¹

The film follows the preparation of a feature article on a town plan in Ironborough (Middlesborough) for an illustrated weekly newspaper. After an editorial meeting at which the pros and cons of the potential story are discussed, a reluctant journalist and photographer are despatched to Ironborough to get the story. Following a tour around the decaying, industrial port town, they meet Max Lock and his team of researchers and planners. Despite his cynicism, Jim, the journalist is quickly impressed by the sincerity and diligence of Lock and his team. A trip around town with a female surveyor demonstrates the thorough nature of their research and that the team have the support and co-operation of the locals. Back in London the editorial team work on the layout of the article (‘How to Plan Your Town’) and are so pleased with it that it nearly becomes the cover story.

Not only does the film enthusiastically record the work of Lock and his team of young surveyors and planners but it gives us a glimpse of the rather pessimistic and cynical attitudes of many people towards planning at the end of the war. During the editorial meeting the journalists are divided about the story’s merits. Jim and one of his colleagues warn that the council’s plans may never materialise, a situation which could backfire on the paper. His other objection is that the plans are prepared without any relation to the people: ‘But you know as well as I do Tom [the editor]. The best of these plans, those worked out with the best of intentions, are done out in the ivory castles of

⁶¹Ibid.

council chambers. The people aren't there. The people must work out their plans if it takes them over twenty years'.

On the journey up to Ironborough Jim's mood is reflective and slightly down-beat. He looks out of the windows of the railway carriage at a war-battered Britain. The city has a forgotten and neglected feeling about it, and we sense that the journalist is making a personal discovery of a forgotten corner of his country after the excitement and glamour of war reporting. This mood is reminiscent of scenes from other films of this period particularly *Diary For Timothy* (1945) and *The Way We Live* (1946) and the similarities with the latter are particularly striking. The plot is in some respects almost identical. In both films, the journalists are very conscious that reconstruction plans are currently in fashion and both question if they will be realised and properly address the needs of the people. They even share a similar world-weary and cynical outlook. Their attitude of cool detachment and reflection is accentuated by the commentary they provide as they research their stories. In *Picture Paper* the journalist's voice is the only one heard during the scenes in Ironborough. Presumably a synchronous-sound track for the location scenes was impractical. However, this actually concentrates the viewers' attention on the journalist's cool personal observation of the plan and the story of Ironborough. A fear that the wartime promises for the future may not be realised pervades all of these films. The message is that the realisation is dependent on the people.

An antidote to this mood is the Ironborough story and the Max Lock planning method. The film champions Max Lock's attempt to gain the maximum participation of

the people in the preparation of redevelopment plans. And since the journalist chosen to write the story is so sceptical, the impact of the Ironborough project is all the more convincing. When given a tour around the planning room, where the survey is being displayed, he notes with caution:

More than most we journalists are suspicious of bits of paper that promise to solve the world's headaches. We've seen too much of it. But maybe it's not the plans which have been wrong but the people who made them. But maybe there have got to be plans. More plans than ever. If you can keep them alive.

The film suggests that there is a new spirit in Britain to rebuild the nation with regard to the peoples needs and potential: 'Truth had broken through the steel hard heart of Ironborough, another sign that we were stirring in Britain,-another sign that we were going to remake all this to live in!'. The sub-text is that the democratic press in Britain is a guardian of the peoples' interests and that they will fight to ensure that its demands are addressed.

A Plan to Work On (1949)⁶² about the re-planning of Dunfermline, touched on a similar theme to *Picture Paper* but was less engaging and successful. The film was to show the state of the town as the result of 'planning to meet contemporary needs by modifying the existing layout and by adding to it.....it will endeavour to show that the town is composed of a series of sociological and historical strata each of which was planned to meet the requirements of its own age and has been altered to meet those of the times succeeding'.⁶³ The director, Kay Mander's report on the project, laid emphasis on the contemporary concern with addressing human needs in planning. She was scornful

⁶² *A Plan to Work On* (1949) , COI for Department of Health for Scotland, pc: Basic, dir: Kay Mander, 35 mins.

⁶³ PRO INF 6/547 William Ballantine, Scottish Information Office to C.R.Jones (COI), 8 March 1947.

of the previous planners of Dunfermline who had been preoccupied with ostentatious architecture. Comparing past plans for the city by Patrick Geddes and Mawson, Mander described them as proposing to turn 'Dunfermline into a cross between the Park at Versailles and the Champs Elysee- impressive but inappropriate'. Although these plans did contain good elements 'they pointed to the essential moral that town planning must, and today does concern itself with people and not only vistas and public building'.⁶⁴

The film concentrated on the work of the architect and his assistant (both portrayed by actors) to redevelop the city along rational lines, but within the constraints and to some extent hampered by, previous town plans. In common with *Picture Paper* the architect and his assistant base their plan upon a wide ranging survey of the town and its people. The town is seen as an organic and working entity, which must be planned to allow for economic and human development. There is a related attempt to depict the architect and planners as approachable men. The chief architect discusses the town's problems with his wife and locals that they meet, he is considerate and keen to teach his younger colleague, he takes his dog for a walk around the surrounding countryside to help him plan the town's space.

A Plan to Work On was designed primarily for specialist audiences of those directly interested in town planning.⁶⁵ But it had originally been hoped that it could be used to create interest and support for planning among the general public by securing theatrical distribution in Scotland.⁶⁶ This never happened. While some people in the

⁶⁴ PRO INF 6/547 Kay Mander of Basic Films, report on 'Dunfermline', 16 March 1947.

⁶⁵ PRO INF 6/547 COI Press release for *A Plan To Work On*, 1949.

⁶⁶ PRO INF 6/547 William Ballantine to C.R.Jones (COI), 8 March 1947.

specialist arena recognised the film's worth in addressing the specialists (RIBA's reviewer noted that it established the part played by architects as town planners)⁶⁷ it was generally regarded as boring and not likely to succeed with general audiences.

This film proves how difficult it was to produce a film on planning in an exciting way, particularly if a documentary approach was attempted. One official at COI Films Division warned John Grierson that most people thought that it was 'too dull for words' and that it would not be a good idea to screen even to the 'specialist press and journals'.⁶⁸ Grierson did not think it was as bad as people said, although he agreed it certainly was 'long-winded'. He felt that they should go ahead with the specialised showing.⁶⁹

Although it tried to impress upon the audience the fact that the town had been planned with the people's involvement and that the architect had great humanity, was even fallible, the overriding impression given by the film was that planning is dry and divorced from the people. The film's writer and director Kay Mander, was disappointed with the result:

That was not a very happy film. First of all it tried to say too much that didn't have a visual method of saying it. So we had this rather boring architect who took his junior all around the town and told him about this that and the other. And that was the main thing that was wrong with that film, was that it was rather boring'.⁷⁰

But Mander felt that planning was a difficult subject to film, pointing out that Jill Craigie's film about the planning of Plymouth had also had problems.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Minutes of the Film, Broadcasting and T.V. Sub-Committee, meeting of 2 December 1948, 11.1.7, RIBA Archive.

⁶⁸ PRO INF 6/547 Miss E.Catch (COI) to John Grierson, Films Division (COI), 25 November 1948.

⁶⁹ PRO, INF 6/547 Memo from John Grierson to Miss E.Catch, 3 December 1948.

⁷⁰ Recorded interview with Kay Mander, IWM Sound Archives, accession no. 14292/14, reel 13.

Houses in the Town (1951)⁷² was designed to promote quality in the construction of public housing.⁷³ During the early stages of production, when the film went under the working title of 'The Council Estate', its aims were to demonstrate to local authorities that 'a council estate need not be row upon row of exactly similar houses, but can contain varied types of houses and be good to look at and live in'.⁷⁴ The first half of the film consists of a lecture to students by Professor Holford on the problems of achieving low housing density without consuming large areas of countryside and agricultural land. This is followed by a discussion, delivered by Frederick Gibberd, on how to achieve architectural interest and diversity in the planning of estates and urban redevelopment. The film ends with a proud presentation, by the L.C.C. planner Robert Matthews, of the Lansbury Neighbourhood redevelopment programme, in the Poplar area of London.

Because of its intended audience the film took a straight forward instructional approach. However, despite its uninspired style, it is imbued with a sense of excitement and optimism for the future of public housing projects, and in fact urban community redevelopment in general. The architects and planners depicted in the film seem genuinely confident that, armed with the knowledge of the past failures in housing and planning design and the application of artistic principles, they can build stimulating and harmonious housing estates. In fact whole neighbourhoods which combine modern building techniques with sound classical principles will produce urban villages with all

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² *Houses in the Town* (1951), sp: COI for Ministry of Planning and Scottish Health Department, pc: Crown, 18 mins.

⁷³ *Research and Modern Housing* (1950), had similar aims.

⁷⁴ COI Film Production Programme 1947-48. Helen Forman Papers.

the excitement, beauty and interest of a traditional village. Although the architects and planners present a theoretical and academic discussion of the ideas of modern planning, they stress that planning is a 'social art' not a 'mathematical table' and so the study of human needs and behaviour are vital to make it work. Thus Gibberd, Matthews and the commentator point out that the architect and planner must get away from the drawing board and, as they demonstrate, try theories out on the ground. There is also an attempt to make the lecturers seem more engaging and chatty, the architects refer to each other by name as the films' themes are passed from one to another, Gibberd is even accompanied by a silent and bespectacled stooge. Despite these attempts at informality it is hard to imagine that the film would have been suitable for general audiences. The RIBA journal obviously thought so as the film was given high praise for its accessibility and clarity: 'a stimulating film which should be of particular value to housing committees of local authorities as well as to the general public'.⁷⁵

The fact that the film took the instructional and educational approach, given the attempts at the time to use more entertaining methods of relating planning issues in the medium, indicates that the film-makers aimed principally at a specialist audience. It is particularly striking that Holford and Gibberd endeavoured to show that these new estates were being built using modern methods and materials, but basing their design upon human needs and by applying classical aesthetic principles and using the traditional English village as a desirable model. Gibberd presents a picture of the urban architect as a character steeped in classical aesthetic and artistic principles. He explains the application of design and aesthetics on housing layout from his study flanked by a large

⁷⁵ 'Review of Films', RIBA Journal, December 1951, p. 59.

pot plant and a classical sculpture. This no doubt reflects an attempt to counteract the then current rising scepticism with architects and particularly planners, who were regarded as remote figures dealing with ideas which were overly scientific, cold and faddish. Although this incidental message for the general public may have served a useful purpose, the primary aim of the film was to persuade local authority planners and architects to look beyond the purely functional purpose of public housing and aspire to build community housing projects which were sensitive to the needs of the people and were both visually varied and aesthetically pleasing. As Gibberd said: 'modern architects and planners are building towns not suburbs'. Thus the description of the Lansbury project is to provide an 'object lesson', of the possibilities for other redevelopment projects.

Throughout the period government officials were aware that housing was a great concern to the general public. In April 1946 the Lord President, Herbert Morrison, urged the official Committee of Home Information to look at housing publicity as it was an issue which affected a number of local authorities and a 'matter on which at some time there may well be public discontent which it might be possible to avoid by the right kind of publicity'.⁷⁶ Morrison's concerns were justified by the findings of a social survey about the economic situation, which revealed that for the period May 1949 to November 1950, housing was still perceived by the public to be one of its biggest problems. Even more worrying was that the findings indicated that the public increasingly blamed the Government for the housing problem rather than unavoidable external factors.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ PRO INF 12/309 Home Information Services (Official) Committee, J.A.R. Pimlott (Privy Council Office) to Sir Eric Bamford (COI), 3 April 1946.

⁷⁷ PRO MH 79/605 Home Information Services Economic Information (Official) Committee, Papers and Correspondence, 1951, Social Survey, p. 6.

As a result a number of films were produced to reassure and explain to the people the work that was being undertaken to build houses. The Ministry of Health was particularly active and sponsored several films on the national house building programme such as *Dover Spring* (1947), *Country Homes* (1947) and, through its Scottish department *Fair Rent* (1946), *A Plan to Work On* (1948) and *Houses in the Town* (1951). *Fair Rent*, although not directly about house building, was designed to help those who were affected by the housing shortage and as a result forced into rented accommodation. The film demonstrates how such people could be protected from exploitative landlords by applying to the local rent tribunal to set a fair rent and ensure that the amenities and furnishings were reasonable.

The purpose of *Dover Spring* (1947) was to inform the public about the work of local authorities to tackle the housing problem.⁷⁸ Started in November 1946, the project (initially known as ‘Rehousing in Dover’) was undertaken by Donald Alexander’s co-operative documentary film company DATA. The film was directed by Mary Beales and shot by Wolfgang Suchitzky who had previously worked together on *Fair Rent* (1947). Although it was produced for the MOH and so was principally about house construction, there was also some input from the MOTCP because the overall planning scheme for Dover (partly conceived by Professor Abercrombie) was also discussed.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ *Dover Spring* (1947), sp: COI for Ministry of Health, pc: DATA, dir: Mary Beales, 16 min.

⁷⁹ PRO HLG 108/11 Minutes of the Housing Publicity Committee, meeting of 24 January 1947, Mr. Fife-Clark (MOH) to Eric Mosbacher (MOTCP).

Dover Spring is another example of the attempt by film-makers to find a more entertaining and novel way of tackling the over-worked and potentially dry topic of housing and planning. Perhaps reflecting the youth of the production team, the film starts off in an irreverent way by parodying the travelogue film. The American commentator tries to stick to his script and the travelogue, but is prevented from doing so by Dover's inhabitants who force him to view the town in contemporary terms. In particular they urge him to examine the people's efforts to redevelop the town along more rational and human lines. After a brief survey and discussion of Dover's new plans to clear the slums, and rationalise the road system, the American is taken on a tour of a construction site on hills overlooking the town and the sea, where an estate of American and British pre-fabs is being established. While there the group witnesses the delivery and assembling of a pre-fab.

Much of the film is a straightforward attempt to promote the government's housing policy, in particular the use of pre-fabs where there is an acute housing shortage. However, the audience is reassured that pre-fabs are an interim measure and that the groundwork is being laid for permanent traditional housing in fully-equipped communities in rationally planned towns. To further reassure the homeless that their needs would be tackled, the speed of assembly of a pre-fab is demonstrated. As housing it is given a universal appeal, and presented as a modern innovation, but one that also conforms with traditional English concepts of privacy and individualism; the American guide jokes that an 'Englishman's pre-fab can be his castle too'. In addition no class stigma is attached to living in a pre-fab; the middle-class donnish guide and his wife are particularly happy pre-fab dwellers. The battle for control of the film's narrative and

style, between the glossy and superficial travelogue and the practical down-beat explanation of Dover's local housing programme, a battle won for the locals, is a subtle way of demonstrating that the government's priorities are those of the people and that they are not to be swayed by an irrelevant nostalgia for Britain's past. Finally, the housing and planning programme is shown as something that concerns and involves all the townsfolk, from the castle warden, to the Mayor and engineer and the middle-class. To the film's credit, one of the few reviews remarks that the 'presentation and commentary are lively'.⁸⁰

To tell the public about the government's efforts it was suggested that *The Task Before the Building Industry* (1950), which had been made for building workers, be re-edited into a ten minute film suitable for a ten-monthly release in the cinemas.⁸¹ The MOH was very unhappy about the proposal and urged rejection of the idea. The idea of the original film had been 'to convince building operatives that there was no danger of their working themselves out of a job if they worked harder'.⁸² While this film was screened to building workers alone, it presented no problems. However, the MOW and COI wanted it to explain a more subtle idea to the general public: 'New homes alone are useless without all the other buildings required to make life worth living', in other words to try to make the public understand the difficulties of trying to 'preserve proper priorities in the utilisation of the national resources'.⁸³ The MOH were of the opinion that such a subtle concept would be difficult to grasp for most members of the public, and particularly for those whose interest in the national problem was minimal and who

⁸⁰ *RIBA Journal*, April 1948.

⁸¹ PRO HLG 108/1 A.A.Ross Films Division (COI) to Miss Crawter (MOH), 12 October 1950.

⁸² PRO HLG 108/1 S.A.Heald (MOH) to Ryan and Blackshaw (MOH), 16 October 1950.

⁸³ PRO HLG 108/1 S.A.Heald to B.P. Barker, Chief Information Officer (MOW), 13 November 1950.

wanted 'a house above all things'.⁸⁴ As Heald put it more directly: 'A film intended to show the industry that it has years of work ahead is likely to have a rather sobering effect on house hunters, however much it is re-edited'.⁸⁵ There was also a political dimension to these objections. The MOH was concerned that the film would be 'accused of being political propaganda' as its release would be close to the General Election. Moreover, Heald noted that housing had become a much more controversial subject since the release of the original non-theatrical version of the film, as the Conservatives were electioneering with a promise to build 300,000 homes a year. Churchill's commitment to house construction was even filmed by the newsreel companies.⁸⁶ In the light of this development, the release of a theatrical version of '*The Task*' would have made the Ministry a target for accusations of bias.⁸⁷ Barker of the MOW, eventually wrote back to the MOH to say that due to reasons of cost, and the stringency of government expenditure on the information services, the proposed re-edit of the film was to be shelved. But he pointedly rejected Heald's reasons for dropping the project.⁸⁸ In fact the MOW was disappointed about having to drop it, and was particularly angry with the COI for consulting the MOH about the idea, even though the Ministry was originally asked to sponsor the re-edit.

Local Government Publicity

In 1945 a white paper was issued on 'Local Government in the Period of Reconstruction'. This reflected widespread concern that local government was likely to

⁸⁴ PRO HLG 108/1 Anonymous MOH official, 13 November 1950.

⁸⁵ PRO HLG 108/1 S.A.Heald to Ryan and Blackshaw (MOH), 16 October 1950.

⁸⁶ Movietone News released a film sponsored by the Conservative Party in 1951 entitled 'Mr. Churchill on Housing', which had been filmed during his speech at the Blackpool conference.

⁸⁷ PRO HLG 108/1 S.A.Heald (MOH) to Barker (MOW), 13 November 1950.

⁸⁸ PRO HLG 108/1 Barker to Heald, 11 January 1951.

face many difficulties in the immediate future, and that it may not be well equipped to cope. It had been denuded of many of its officers by the war and the priority was to replace them with able people both as elected members and full-time officials.⁸⁹ The conditions of the war also threatened to harm the first wartime local elections to be held in November 1945.

Local elections are to be resumed in November after six years during which no one has cast a vote and millions of rate-payers have been away on war service. Large numbers of men and women eligible to vote will have no knowledge of the activities of their local authority; may well come back to areas in which they are complete strangers; and many of the service men and women, apparently, will return with a very low opinion of the whole system of local democracy.⁹⁰

In order to raise the awareness of local government the MOH's Consultative Committee on Local Government Publicity investigated and planned a widespread publicity campaign. It argued that in order to achieve the more efficient working of local democracy there should be publicity to interest the local electorate in 'all-the-year-round' local government, not just a drive to get people to vote at election time. Publicity was also required to educate people who were newly enfranchised as the regulations had been changed to include all Parliamentary voters. The widespread use of film in adult education and the apparent demand for it from a variety of groups studying local government helped to convince the committee that this would be a key tool for improving local public relations.⁹¹ Film was also favoured because there was a particular interest in stimulating the interest of the young in 'civic affairs' who it was believed responded well to this medium. These findings led the committee in December 1946, to approve the production of two films, later expanded to three, which could be used for

⁸⁹ PRO HLG 52/1396 Publicity for Local Government, February 1945.

⁹⁰ PRO HLG 52/1396 Publicity for Local Government, February 1945.

⁹¹ PRO HLG 108/5 Fife-Clark (MOH) to Helen de Moulpied (COI) , 22 January 1947.

educational purposes by local authorities themselves and shown to general cinema audiences.⁹² Because reconstruction was such an important local issue it formed the basis for at least one of the proposed films. Reconstruction was also favoured because it was thought likely to hold people's attention. During the planning stages of the programme one committee member wanted the suggested topics to more closely reflect the public's immediate concerns which were 'on more vital matters such as housing'.⁹³

The Battleaxe

In addition to these shorter films a second feature was proposed to 'interest people in the drama and achievements of local authority work, and at the same time utter a challenge on the work that is still to be done'.⁹⁴ As further evidence of the attempt by COI officials and others to make planning films more exciting and engaging, Philip Mackie approached the novelist, Joyce Cary, to prepare a script.⁹⁵ The 'liberal-progressive' Cary had written a book on juvenile delinquency, Charles is My Darling (1940), which had greatly impressed Mackie.⁹⁶ Emphasising the importance of physical reconstruction as an issue of local government, Cary chose this as the focus of his script, which became known as 'The Battleaxe'. It was hoped that the film would get theatrical distribution as a second feature of four to six reels (40-60 minutes long). After reading Cary's outline, Mackie commented that he had 'great confidence in him to produce

⁹² Ibid. The films proposed at this stage were : 1) 'What the town hall does' for N-T distribution. 2) A study of local government authorities with particular reference to the problems of reconstruction. 3) A commercial film for cinema audiences. It was planned that these three films should form the first part of a total programme of six films to be made over two years.

⁹³ PRO HLG 52/1396 Councillor Binns in the minutes of a meeting of the Consultative Committee on Local Government Publicity, 21 November 1946.

⁹⁴ PRO HLG 108/5 Letter to Philip Mackie, Films Division (COI), 23 August 1947.

⁹⁵ Joyce Cary, the Irish-born novelist, had been a colonial administrator in Nigeria. He also wrote the script for the MOI approved Two Cities film, *Man of Two Worlds* (1946).

⁹⁶ This description of Cary is found in Jeffrey Richards, Thorold Dickinson: the Man and His Films, (1986), p. 113.

something very down to earth and un-artificial'.⁹⁷ Indeed the intention was to move away from films that were overtly propagandist and go for a more populist format.

We consider we should be fully justified in making a second feature like this in which the purpose is only quietly implied. Indeed, there's not much chance of getting wide distribution for our second features unless they are primarily entertainment. And it is worth quoting from Cary's covering letter, "The thing depends entirely on the character sketches- that must be done between director and writer in the workout. There must be no propaganda in the presentation, you want a slice of life in which politics is seen as an essential part of the slice-of every slice".⁹⁸

In order to do this Mackie suggested that they use a director normally associated with feature films.

It needs a first-rate director, who could collaborate with Cary in the writing and then make this film. A second- rate director could so easily make it clumsy and pompous. Charles Crichton, who made *Hue and Cry* might be very good on it, and we have it in mind to show the story outline to Sir Michael Balcon of Ealing. If not Ealing then Wessex (who now have Jack Lee) might be interested.⁹⁹

The plot of Cary's dialogue treatment was as follows:

It shows the battle put up by an old woman ("The Battleaxe") who owns a tumble down shop scheduled with other property for demolition in the council's plan for redevelopment of this part of the town; the realisation of her daughter-in-law (and later somewhat reluctantly of her son also) that they will be better off in a newly developed housing estate where their unborn child will be able to grow up free from the bad influences engendered in the slum and typified by the 'Gang' of potential juvenile delinquents. When the young people think they have at last carried the day, and persuaded the Battleaxe to quit, apathy on the part of the voters in a referendum causes the council's plan to be defeated, and the Battleaxe is left still in possession of her ramshackle home-a somewhat hollow victory.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ PRO HLG 108/5 Philip Mackie to Fife-Clark, 12 November 1947.

⁹⁸ PRO HLG 108/5 Philip Mackie to Betty Crawter, Public Relations Dept. (MOH), 10 January 1948.

⁹⁹ PRO HLG 108/5 Philip Mackie to Betty Crawter, 10 January 1948.

¹⁰⁰ PRO HLG 108/5 Film on Local Government Reconstruction Problems, 29 September 1948.

The script gives an insight and a flavour of the post-war world of austerity and local politics. Rather than attempting to conjure up the 'new world' it concentrates on the political problems of achieving a consensus for local reconstruction projects. Not simply that locals might object to reconstruction proposals for selfish reasons, but that political apathy in general could destroy all the progressive forces. The script offers the audience a stark choice by suggesting that this plan was dropped because those in favour of reconstruction failed to vote in the local election in which the plan was the main issue. While this rarely happened in practise, the more general inference that disinterest could contribute to victory by organised vested interest against reconstruction, was a feature of the story in some cities such as Hull.¹⁰¹ Thus the script captures a mood of post-war deflation and cynicism which was also observed in feature films such as *Hue and Cry* (1946) and *Passport to Pimlico* (1949). Although the script makes a very simplistic division between the forces of progress (the younger generation) and the forces of reaction (the older generation) it is unusual in suggesting that the forces of opposition could also come from the ordinary people- in this case a shop-owner. As we have seen in previous films and proposals, opposition to new towns and town planning usually came from wealthier classes and groups. In Hemel Hempstead and Coventry some of the stiffest opposition to the new town and shopping precinct respectively, came from retailers. The script gives us a sense of the frustration many people felt at having to wait so long for their bomb-damaged houses to be repaired and government promises on town plans, building of hospitals etc. to be fulfilled. The 'Battleaxe' also documents the post-war problems of juvenile delinquency. Thus in the script the plan's provision for parks is seen as a crucial way to help deal with it.

¹⁰¹ Nick Tiratsoo, Reconstruction, Affluence and Labour Politics: Coventry 1945-1960 (1990), p. 106.

Civil servants were excited by the script and particularly liked the realistic, lively dialogue. Miss Barson, a member of the Local Government Consultative Committee, described the dialogue as ‘virile and the characterisation excellent’ and that it was ‘a remarkably good attempt to show local government from the end of the telescope- the impact on ordinary people, looking up to the town hall instead of from the town hall downwards’.¹⁰² However, she expressed concern that in such an unusual treatment of local government, in which the ‘film-makers must be given a considerable amount of licence’, there was a danger that the honest portrayal of the battle for the plan could actually leave the audience supporting those who opposed it. John Mumford, an Information Officer at the MOTCP concurred: ‘Ignoring the general trend of the film, which is pretty favourable to planning, I am not quite sure that Martha Boon’s final triumph (I beat the council and I beat the plan and I’ll beat em’ again) is a very good note on which to end up’.¹⁰³ Thus instructions were given to the director, Donald Taylor (Crown Film) to bring the film down, by implication on the right side, so that Mrs Boon’s final triumph would be seen as really a ‘hollow victory’. A related problem was that the forces of progress, particularly embodied in the councillor and district nurse, were drawn as such pompous and priggish figures that they were unlikely to win people’s respect.

These are always (the faces of progress) portrayed as serious and bespectacled, or pompous and toying with brief cases. It is a matter of ill fortune that councillors and teachers and magistrates are often pompous and only too conscious of their mission, but to portray officialdom thus will unquestionably make Mrs. Battleaxe a heroic.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² PRO HLG 108/5 Note to Parliamentary secretary to present to the Consultative Committee on Local Government, 28 September 1948.

¹⁰³ PRO HLG 108/5 John Mumford (MOTCP) to Fife-Clark, 28 October 1948.

¹⁰⁴ PRO HLG 108/5 Peter Brown (MOH) reaction to Cary script, 27 September 1948.

In the script councillor Wayne, was described as ‘bald, plump, old, in pince-nez, anxious to be friends with everyone’. Fife-Clark insisted that ‘we cannot afford to have in this film’ councillors and officials being ‘made the butt of other characters’.¹⁰⁵ Not only would this portrayal tend to make audiences more sympathetic to those against the plan, but it would also, as Betty Cawter pointed out, tend to bring local government in to disrepute.¹⁰⁶ Peter Brown thought that ‘councillor Wayne’ should be replaced with a ‘friendly, and pipe-smoking sort of fellow of the Ralph Richardson type’, someone who is ‘essentially one of the people themselves, perhaps more intelligent, but quiet, pipe-smoking and content to let facts do the talking’. He suggested that the propaganda should be ‘subtle and oblique-that is to say it suggests to the public that it should interest itself in local affairs, without being too school-masterly about it’.¹⁰⁷ With these modifications it was hoped that ‘the audience at the end will rest with the new generation against the old (however likeable an old Battleaxe she may be) and the forces of progress against anarchistic or individual resistance’.¹⁰⁸ It was also suggested that Mrs. Boon’s son and daughter-in-law (Harry and Molly), who represented progress, be built up in order to amplify the significance of their realisation of the benefits of the council plan to themselves and others.

As the plot involved a question of whether or not the cleared land should be used for housing or a playing field, the MOTCP were consulted although the MOH remained responsible for its funding. In the script there is a referendum on the plan, which is

¹⁰⁵ PRO HLG 108/5 Fife-Clark (MOH) to Philip Mackie (COI), 10 October 1949.

¹⁰⁶ PRO HLG 108/5 Betty Cawter to Philip Mackie, 4 February 1948.

¹⁰⁷ PRO HLG 108/5 Peter Brown, 23 September 1948.

¹⁰⁸ PRO HLG 108/5 Miss Barson, 28 September 1948.

eventually lost by the plan's proponents. Mumford asked that this be removed from the plot, as there was no precedent for such an event: 'it seems [in view of the MOTCP] to be looked upon as quite impossible that such a thing would happen and therefore I suppose that mention of it could prove an embarrassment for L.A.'s'. The MOH, however, wanted the inclusion of some 'sort of a ballot' on the plan, although they agreed it should not be too 'literal or precise.... The important thing is to get over the point that the price of apathy is a heavy one, which ordinary people themselves have to pay'.¹⁰⁹ Barson also felt the film-makers should be given licence to include a referendum, 'since it avoids a number of difficulties which would otherwise arise'.¹¹⁰

When the COI first approached the Treasury for funding for the project, they were promised that favourable consideration would be given to an application of up to £30,000.¹¹¹ Work on the film went ahead with John Taylor of the Crown Film Unit appointed director. The fact that Crown was given the commission is an indication of the project's prestige. It was hoped that filming would start in February 1949, but in May the project was temporarily abandoned when new conditions on finance for film production forced the MOH to withdraw. If the Ministry had spent the £30,000 required for 'The Battleaxe' it would have had to cancel its programme of short films including one considered vital on mental health. Although this was a disappointment, it was to some extent mitigated by the fact that an hour's programme of films on local government

¹⁰⁹ PRO HLG 108/5 Fife-Clark to Mumford, 29 October 1948.

¹¹⁰ PRO HLG 108/5 Miss Barson, 28 September 1948.

¹¹¹ PRO HLG 108/5 Mackie to Fife-Clark, 27 August 1948.

was now ready. Thus the plans of the Consultative Committee of 1946 had partially been realised.¹¹²

As a post-script, in 1949 the COI were approached by Joyce Cary's agents to obtain permission to re-sell the rights for the story to a feature film producer. Apparently Ealing Studios in particular were interested in the project. In his letter to the MOH seeking permission to sell the rights, Mackie pointed out that it would be a good way to recoup the costs of the outline (which had been £600) and might even lead to a commercial film being produced free of charge which would carry the 'right sort of message' for the MOH.¹¹³ The MOH agreed to let the COI sell Cary's story.¹¹⁴

The Glen is Ours (1946) was one of the small group of films produced to encourage participation in local government.¹¹⁵ As with the *The Battleaxe* it tried to interest people in local politics by dramatising an issue of urban land use. The subject of the film is a battle to prevent the sale to developers of some park land in a fictional Scottish town.

In many respects the film follows a similar format to 'The Battleaxe', although the characters are drawn in a less obviously symbolic fashion. The exact nature of the council election is never explained and could be misconstrued as a kind of referendum

¹¹² This comprised *Local Government: A History in Pictures* (1949) (produced by the Foreign Office) and *One Man's Story* (1948). There was also a suggestion to edit *A City Speaks* into a two reel version which could be distributed to those interested in local government.

¹¹³ PRO HLG 108/5 Philip Mackie to Miss Betty Cawter, 30 August 1949.

¹¹⁴ PRO HLG 108/5 Cawter to Mackie, 20 September 1949.

¹¹⁵ *The Glen is Ours* (1946), sp: COI for the Scottish Office, pc: Verity with the Film Producers Guild, 31 mins.

since it is fought entirely on one issue (the future of the Glen) with no mention of local parties fighting to gain control.

This is a successful film in that it is entertaining as well as managing to convey the message about the importance of participation in local politics. An added strength is its relevant, contemporary feel. The main characters, such as the returning ex-soldier, who leads the campaign against the sale of the local park known as the Glen, and the corrupted older generation of incumbent local politicians, were figures with which post-war audiences could identify and were featured in other films of the time such as *Land Of Promise* and the feature films *All Over The Town* and *Badgery Green*.

Conclusion

This account of the making and reception of films on planning and housing gives us a valuable perspective on contemporary attitudes to reconstruction of both government officials and the public. Despite the Labour government's large parliamentary majority and an apparent wartime consensus on the need for wide-scale reconstruction, they were anxious to bring people on their side in the various schemes to redevelop Britain's built environment. Both in the content and style of the films proposed and made, there was a sincere effort not just to interest people in the theories and methods of reconstruction outlined, but to get them to think about and understand the ramifications of, for example, new towns or city redevelopment. The earnestness with which this educational goal was pursued, led officials to nominate some of the duller, most theoretical or inappropriate titles (e.g. *A Plan to Work On*, and *The Task Before the Building Industry*) for general distribution. This indicates that planning and reconstruction were regarded as processes

of change which had to be introduced in a democratic way. This observation is reinforced by the fact that films repeatedly portrayed redevelopment schemes as fully involving the people: the plans themselves were developed after a widespread survey of the people's lives and needs; the final decision to redevelop an area or build a new town was seen as the expression of the people's will, occasionally formalised through some form of ballot.

Stylistically there was an attempt to find novel and entertaining methods of relating the themes of reconstruction. Sadly, many of the most imaginative projects were not realised, but some such as *New Town* and *Dover Report* were both entertaining and didactic. One might also say that the attempt to achieve a populist style for government films reflects a more democratic approach to public housing. The policy was now one of widespread housing provision with access as a right based on housing need rather than more subjective criteria of 'deservedness'.

The success of this populist strategy was rewarded with wider distribution. At a meeting in January 1948, a COI memo reported that due to improved relations with the commercial distributors of Wardour Street, twice as many films had been sold to the trade in 1947 as during an average wartime year. An added bonus was the 'enormous increase in the volume' of official films going abroad, which had generally been made for domestic distribution.¹¹⁶ The following month the COI reported that four times as many official films (excluding feature length war films by service departments) were

¹¹⁶ PRO MH 79/588 Minutes and agenda of the Home Information Services Committee, meeting of 9 January 1948.

gaining theatrical distribution as before the war. B.C. Sendall of the COI attributed this to a move away from documentary: 'It had also to be remembered that exhibitors had never regarded documentary films as very palatable owing to their subjects and techniques' and 'that the rising figures for theatrical distribution were an indication that the problems of giving official film a higher entertainment value was being tackled with some success'.¹¹⁷

The preceding case studies have revealed that officials responsible for films wanted to depict local politicians and planners as judges or impartial guides and pipe-smoking moderates; a fact which indicates their wish to counter a perceived image of them as egotists who were remote from reality. The realisation of the public's dislike of planners led some to suggest their removal from films altogether. A more reassuring image contradicted popular perceptions, and also portrayed the massive changes proposed as less revolutionary, more reasonable, organic, and in tune with British social and democratic traditions. It also marks a move away from representations of planning as highly modern and scientific and mysterious. This suggests that the Labour government had recognised that the 'people' were conservative and needed to be introduced to the 'new world' more gently.

This portrayal was also linked to a liking for presenting the discussion of planning as a debate in which the audience's role was to weigh up the options and decide the result for themselves. Watching such a film would stimulate people's interest in the

¹¹⁷ PRO MH 79/588 Minutes of the Home Information Services Committee, meeting of 27 February 1948.

planning process and, perhaps, teach them the habit of participation in readiness for the time when plans were prepared for their own towns.

Another new development was a stress on portraying the human issues in planning. This related to the aim of developing more entertaining films, but it was also intended to stimulate people to think about the ethical issues in reconstruction. It was hoped that if people thought about, for example, the siting of a new town as a moral problem they would be more likely to put aside their own personal objections in favour of the greater good. The stress on the mixed class content of new towns was an ultimate goal of the Labour government but its more pressing aim was to overcome the intolerance of snobs living in designated new town areas. Similarly, films avoided portraying the debate on reconstruction in class terms for fear of stirring up class hatred. This underlines the Labour government's commitment to creating a harmonious and cohesive society, but it also reveals the difficulties that they had in creating a socialist society when in fact socialist men and women were a rare breed.¹¹⁸

It is striking that in comparison with wartime films on planning and reconstruction, the post-war films began to move away from explaining the issues in theoretical and abstract terms to exploring the more practical, human and emotional dimensions. New towns were described in warm and familiar terms, with many references to the rearing of families and of opportunities for a new start. This change comes from the realisation that popular attitudes were becoming more home-orientated

¹¹⁸ See Steven Fielding, Peter Thompson and Nick Tiratsoo (eds.), England Arise: The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain, (1995), especially pp. 212-218.

and that the ‘political’ or theoretical arguments for a particular policy were likely to have less impact on audiences which had become sated with propaganda.

Finally, wartime films on this subject had urged the people to vote and apply other political pressure to ensure that a post-war government was committed to widescale reconstruction on rational and humane lines. Post-war films such as the *Glen Is Ours* and *Picture Paper* encouraged participation in reconstruction planning and local politics to ensure that progressive and modernising plans would not be lost as a result of the power of locally-organised opposition.

Chapter Seven: Post-War Local Government Films on the Reconstruction of the Built Environment.

The previous chapter has examined how central government films portrayed the pressing subject of housing and town planning during the period in which crucial reconstruction legislation was passed, town plans finalised and building work actually begun. Alongside films from the COI and other government departments, were many titles sponsored by other organisations, reflecting the widespread interest in the subject. J.Arthur Rank was involved in two documentary films; the Liverpool Gas Company sponsored a third about Liverpool's redevelopment and there were numerous newsreel items, mainly reporting on the government's efforts to address the housing crisis.¹ Pathe was particularly interested in the subject, with fourteen items in issues released between May 1946 and October 1949. There were also three feature films which built a story around a local town planning controversy.² But the largest number (approximately eleven) were produced by local authorities whose important task it was to prepare redevelopment and reconstruction plans and carry them out.³ This chapter will concentrate on the local government films, explain why they were produced, the images they presented of reconstruction, how they

¹ *Homes for Workers* (1949) pc: National Film Agency, sp: Liverpool Gas Corporation; *Homes for All* (1947) , This Modern Age Series, sp: Rank, *A Planned Town* (1946/7), sp: Rank.

² *Badgery Green* (1949), *All Over the Town* (1949), *Miss Pilgrim's Progress* (1950).

³ *A City Speaks* (1947) 69 mins; *Neighbourhood 15* (1948) 45 mins; *Greenock Plans Ahead* (1948); *Progress Report* (1946) , *Progress Report II* (1948), *Our Homes* (1949), *Our City, Today and Tomorrow* (1949); *Glasgow-Today and Tomorrow* (1949), *A Home of Your Own* (1951), 22 mins. Other local governments which are known to have investigated and may have produced films (not traced) on reconstruction and other subjects are Wolverhampton (a film for the city's centenary), Edinburgh, Bristol (*The Bridge*) Norwich and Kings Lynn. The Kings Lynn council wanted a film about local building and the industrial centre.

were shown and received and how successful they were at eliciting local interest, support and involvement in redevelopment plans. This analysis will be based on two case studies: *A City Speaks* (Manchester, 1946) and *Neighbourhood 15* (West Ham, 1948).

Before the war a small number of local authorities, notably Bermondsey and the L.C.C., had produced propaganda films. These local authorities had been far-seeing and high spending ones who were undertaking a broad programme of municipal socialism, key elements of which were public health and slum clearance. After the war many local governments were now responsible for overseeing large reconstruction and building projects. These schemes could be contentious, entailing the destruction of existing buildings and residential areas and decanting people to new developments in the hinterland or to satellite towns. The construction of new towns was sometimes integral to such schemes which created the additional problem of antagonising people living on the site of the proposed new town. On the other hand the acute housing shortage, particularly in city areas which had experienced destruction from bombing, meant that local authorities were under great pressure to build new homes quickly. Their efforts were constrained by local and national shortages of building materials, skilled labour and the slowness of planning legislation.

In these circumstances local authorities had to transmit the message that they were making progress in addressing the housing problem, even if progress seemed very slow. Public relations, including film was seen as a valuable way of assuaging people's fears

and frustrations and overcoming resistance to contentious and costly urban redevelopment schemes. The widespread wartime use of film by central government for public information and propaganda had given the medium new respectability and status. Forward-looking councils such as Leeds and Manchester even seriously considered the proposals of local film societies to build special civic film centres which would co-ordinate the production of civic films and put on shows and screenings of educational films.⁴ As Reg Cordwell, a founder member of the Manchester and Salford Film Society, expressed it: 'The war years proved the value of informational films to combat apathy, improve skill and build up morale among the people. They are still needed to help to train citizens to clarify the tasks ahead'.⁵

But film was not only seen as a defensive instrument of council propaganda. As Reg Cordwell's comment indicates, many people, particularly on the left, saw a much more positive role for public relations and film. The Labour Party's interest in using public relations to promote citizenship was a key element in their wider strategy of building a socialist society.⁶ This meant not just encouraging interest in local affairs and

⁴ The Manchester Corporation Post-war Reconstruction Committee was sufficiently interested in the future of 'civic films' to include Reg Cordwell's proposal for a 500 seat Municipal Film Centre in the brief to the city architect, for the design of a public hall to house ceremonial and cultural events. In the end Manchester and Salford Film Society's proposals were not taken up as it was considered that most of the film work was already being undertaken by the Corporation in some way. Although the society's idea to use the centre to co-ordinate municipal film production was considered a possibility for the future. The details of these proposals are found in the minutes of the Post-War Reconstruction Committee, February-June 1945 Manchester Central Library Local Studies Archive.

⁵ Reg Cordwell article on the end of the COI mobile film service, in unidentified local newspaper article, late 1940s, Reg Cordwell's scrap book, Reg Cordwell Papers. North West Film Archive.

⁶ See Abigail Beach, 'Forging a Nation of Participants': Political and Economic Planning in Labour's Britain', in Richard Weight and Abigail Beach (eds.), The Right to Belong: Citizenship and National Identity in Britain, 1930-1960, (1998), p. 101.

increasing voter registration but participation in specific aspects of local policy-making notably reconstruction. This was encouraged by government legislation particularly the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act whose provisions on compensation and betterment meant local authorities had to consult widely when drawing up reconstruction plans.

The Labour government's first concern was to use PR to improve the effectiveness of local democracy. As we have seen this led the Consultative Committee on Local Government Publicity to approve a film programme which included titles exploring the issues of local democracy through housing and planning. The local government trade union NALGO shared the Labour Party's enthusiasm for public relations and particularly film as a means to promote citizenship and build a bridge between local government and the electorate. In fact it included film among the suggestions made to the Consultative Committee on Local Government Publicity, on ways of improving local public relations.⁷ Consequently the union took a close interest in the British Council film on local government, even though it was actually designed to provide a very simple and 'rudimentary knowledge' of local government suitable as an introduction for 'educated natives in the colonies'. One of NALGO's national officers, Alex Spoor, even sat in on a day's shooting so that he could be consulted by the filmmakers if they had any queries.⁸

⁷ PRO HLG 52/1396 Minutes of the Consultative Committee on Local Government Publicity, 8 (ix), meeting of 27 February 1947.

⁸ PRO BW 4/39 Alex Spoor to Mr London (Signet Pictures) 13 August 1943.

The Labour government was also keen to encourage local arts and entertainment as part of its strategy to combat the people's preference for a passive and consumerist popular culture, which was believed to be an obstacle to socialism.⁹ The Local Government Act of 1948 contributed to this goal by encouraging the screening and production of educational and informational titles that would provide an alternative to the escapist fare of the commercial cinemas. The act made specific provision for local authorities to show films which would relate to local government issues. This was achieved firstly, by giving councils the right to screen 16mm films anywhere in their area and to levy a charge if necessary. Secondly, by enabling councils to spend annually the product of a 6d rate, plus the net amount of receipts derived from such shows, it provided them with a means to fund such screenings and even produce their own films.¹⁰

Those who had worked in official production were keen advocates of film as a tool to revitalise democracy. In an article written for Progress, NALGO's journal for PR officers, Helen de Mouilpied encouraged local government to sponsor films that would do more than just provide information:¹¹

This drama of the doorstep isn't just a business of information which is to be poured out to a passive recipient. Men and women must be persuaded to want to participate actively, and that means they must be shown themselves and their relation to the community in a way to strike imagination and move their sympathy.¹²

⁹ Steven Fielding, Peter Thompson and Nick Tiratsoo, England Arise: The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain, (Manchester, 1995), p 135.

¹⁰ Local Government Act, 1948, section 135.

¹¹ After her work at the MOI in non-theatrical distribution she was appointed Chief Production Officer at the COI. By 1948 she was also a member of St. Pancras borough council and of the Committee for the Preparation and Production of Visual Aids set up by the Ministry of Education.

¹² Helen de Mouilpied, 'The Film and Local Government', in Progress, no. 3 (1948).

She thought this local interest would result in better work by the council itself but would also encourage people to become involved and take greater responsibility themselves in community activities such as tenants associations, public gardens, and libraries. As she argued: 'At these points the they become us'.

Requests from local governments to borrow films on citizenship had started even before the war had ended. When the town clerk of Leamington Spa heard about the film *Local Government* he contacted the British Council directly to borrow a print to incorporate in their exhibition on local government.¹³ By 1946 there was steady demand around the country for COI and British Council films for local government campaigns and initiatives to interest the electorate in 'civic affairs', a trend enthusiastically reported and encouraged by the contributors to *Progress*.¹⁴ A typical scheme was that set up by the Lambeth Borough Council to provide free film shows for local groups and clubs to 'develop the creation and expression of public opinion'.¹⁵

At Sheffield, library film shows replaced lectures that had been used to 'arouse interest in books'. Therefore the publicity for the screenings also included a book list of relevant titles that could be borrowed from the library. The first season began in

¹³ PRO BW 4/39 A.F.Greenland, Town Clerk, Leamington Spa to A.J.S. White (British Council) 27 April 1945.

¹⁴ *Progress* was a NALGO publication for public relations officers working in local government. It started in 1946 as a duplicated bulletin and was upgraded to a magazine in the summer of 1948 when the first issue was published.

¹⁵ Anon. 'Among the Film Societies', *16mm Film User*, April 1947, Vol. 1 No. 1.

November 1947 with a show of three films on the commonwealth and empire, other themes for the first season, which ran until April 1948, included *Industrial Britain*, *Secrets of Nature* and *Living Together*.¹⁶ The success of this season encouraged the Committee of Libraries, Art Galleries and Museums, to run more seasons of free film shows, which continued well into the 1950s. By the second season the aims of the programme had expanded from simply encouraging the reading of library books to raising civic consciousness.

Before the citizen can form a sound judgement on affairs, cast a vote wisely, and generally play a full part in the life of the community, he or she must have some knowledge of ideas and things and people. How to gain this knowledge is, to many, a problem. The method of concentrated study seems dull and uninviting to those without an academic flair, and few of the many processes of self-education have a wide appeal.

One solution of this problem is being offered by the producers of special films on a wide variety of subjects. Such films help people to live in our world by showing it as it is- real, living and warm with human interest.

Only films which introduce and explain subjects in a general way are suitable for entertaining and informing the general public. Of the several methods of following up an interest once it has been so aroused, the most valuable and important and certainly the most popular is the right use of books.¹⁷

¹⁶ The programme 'Living Together' on the 'design of houses, community centres, the individuals part in shaping public opinion, and the standard of living' reflected the growing preoccupation with reconstruction. The films screened were *Houses in History*, *Good Neighbours*, *Public Opinion* and *Can We Be Rich*. Two hundred and seventy six people attended this show. Sheffield City Libraries ninety-first Annual Report, 1947-48, p. 20. Sheffield Library Local Studies.

¹⁷ Councillor A. Ballard, Chairman Libraries, Art Galleries and Museums Committee, 'The Film and the Book', introduction to Film Shows, The Programme of the Winter Session, 1948-49, at the Central Library Theatre. WP2226, British Library.

In many instances such shows were designed to publicise municipal reconstruction. For example, towards the end of the war the British Council received requests from Hornsey and Tottenham Borough Councils to screen *The Development of the English Town* (1943) in conjunction with their planning exhibitions.¹⁸ After the war a number of local PR officers took the opportunity of a commercial screening of the film *The Way We Live* to focus peoples' minds on local reconstruction. When the film came to Blackpool the local PRO arranged for a town planning exhibition of models and plans of the borough's largest housing estate, then under construction, to be placed in the foyer.¹⁹ At Stranraer the PRO combined the screening with a town planning exhibition and invited an audience of councillors, local officials, and school children.

PRO's adopted a number of tactics to make local government film shows more popular and get audiences more involved in the themes presented. At Hastings it was found that coffee and biscuits helped to turn the screenings into social occasions. In many local areas films were combined with talks by local councillors or officers.²⁰ Progress recommended that specialist speakers should be provided for all film shows to 'drive home' the point of the film with 'local examples and illustrations' and in order to be able to respond to audience questions.²¹ To this end the Great Yarmouth PRO arranged a 'civic performance' of *The Way We Live* at which the borough engineer showed plans and drawings of local reconstruction projects in the cinema foyer. Bristol's

¹⁸ PRO BW 4/45 Hornsey to British Council, Film Department, 16 June 1944. Tottenham to British Council, Film Department, 28 August 1945.

¹⁹ Progress, 8 (1950), p. 341.

²⁰ Progress, 7 (1950), p. 290.

²¹ Progress, 'Hints on Running Film Shows', 10 (1952), p. 29.

PRO, G. Morley-Davis, encouraged audience involvement and interest in the films by balloting them on the educational and informational value of the titles screened. He claimed that this technique 'held their interest and contributed to lively audience participation'.²²

In many areas these reconstruction events were put on by the local film society. Indeed it was this movement which had developed the serious and innovative methods of using film which were adopted by local government PRO's after the war. For example the Bath Film Society's first show in March 1947 consisted of a programme which included the documentaries *Housing Problems*, *Kensal House* and *When We Build Again*. This was followed by a talk by Alderman S.Day, chairman of the Bath Housing Committee, on the 'lead given by the city in rehousing' and details of 'the strides that had been made'.²³

As valuable as these screenings were, the problem for many local authorities was that films available through the CFL and other distributors were not necessarily relevant to local conditions. The answer for some councils was to produce their own films. For larger local authorities there were plenty of professional film-makers keen to take on such work. In the late 1940s independent short-film and documentary film-makers who had received much MOI patronage found that the COI was less interested in offering them

²² Progress, 'What Can a NALGO Branch do in PR', 8 (1950), p. 340.

²³ 16mm Film User, November (1946).

contracts.²⁴ As part of a strategy to gain alternative sponsors the Federation of Documentary Film Units issued a series of bulletins promoting the value of documentary film and two in particular, Films and Local Government and Films and Housing were aimed particularly at local authorities.²⁵

When Kay Mander was looking to make another film on planning she asked the RIBA Films Sub-Committee for advice on a suitable local authority to approach. Not only did she think such a film would be of topical interest and therefore merit inclusion in the 1951 Festival of Britain exhibition, but that it was most likely that a local authority would be keen for such a film and would thus fund the project.²⁶

There is no doubt that local authorities were also excited by the prospect of producing their own films and were keen to be associated with the prestige of this modern medium. The close interest and involvement of local councillors and government officers with a number of local films is clear testimony to this. During script discussions with film producers they frequently provided lengthy script suggestions and could even be persuaded to appear in the films, re-enacting tedious scenes from council committee meetings and the Council chamber. The glamour of film sometimes proved a great attraction. During the production of *A City Speaks* the Film Committee appears to have

²⁴ The effects of this decline in government work forced Paul Rotha to close his company Films of Fact in 1948. The reasons for this change in attitude by the COI and the effects of this decline in government contracts on Rotha and particularly Donald Alexander's firm DATA is discussed in Albert P. Hogenkamp's 'The use of film as a medium of information with special reference to the politics of the 1945-51 British Labour Government' (PhD thesis, CNAA, 1991).

²⁵ FDFU Bulletin No.5, Films and Housing, March 1947.

²⁶ Minutes of the Films, Broadcasting and T.V. Sub-Committee, meeting of 13 May 1949, RIBA Archive.

come under pressure to include shots of the Lady Mayoress. The producer was duly instructed to 'take special shots of the Lady Mayoress' which were paid for out of the film's contingency fund.²⁷

Central government became keen for local authorities to take responsibility for their own film production when financial cuts reduced the MOH's ambitious local government film programme to an hour and a half of film.²⁸ In the spring of 1949 the Home Information Services Film Programme Committee adopted a policy described as the 'decentralisation of the production of pedagogic subjects'. This involved encouraging local authorities and specialist organisations to produce their own films, specifically those of 'social concern which HMG could not itself sponsor'.²⁹ Guidance in local production was to be given by COI regional film officers and possibly Crown Unit officials. The funds for the films were to come from the COI vote, but it would presumably be a cheaper way of producing films.³⁰ As the policy took shape the likely cost to the COI diminished, when it was decided that local film societies and amateur film-makers should be encouraged to make such films. It was proposed that the best way to get the films made was by persuading the BFI to organise a film competition: 'to encourage the formation of local societies and to direct their interests to subjects with a public purpose

²⁷ Minutes of the Civic Film Special Committee, meeting of 17 June 1946, Manchester Central Library Local Studies.

²⁸ The programme was made up of: *Local Government; A History in Pictures* (1949), a 10 min COI animated film for the MOH on the growth of local government over 1000 years. *One Man's Story*, a 27 min. Film sponsored by the Ministry of Health and a two reel version of *A City Speaks* (1947).

²⁹ PRO MH 79/597 Minutes of the Film Programme Committee (Home Information Services), meeting of 1 March 1949.

³⁰ PRO MH 79/597 Minutes of the Film Programme Committee (Home Information Services), meeting of 1 March 1949.

such as the hospital service and town and country planning'.³¹ Forsyth-Hardy, of the Scottish Office

recalled the great influence the film festivals held in the 1930's on amateur productions. In view of the very wide effect of the comment and criticism of the adjudication on such occasions, he suggested that the adjudication for the proposed competition should be one who would influence film production in the right direction.³²

In addition to rigging the competitions to ensure that films with a 'public purpose' were made, the Committee asked Stuart Legg, of the Crown Film Unit, to write an article for an amateur film producers' periodical which would help to 'influence the societies choice of subject' for production in the following year.³³ Legg and Forsyth-Hardy also undertook to adjudicate at amateur film competitions in the coming season.³⁴

For smaller towns without the resources of Manchester, Glasgow or London, the cost of a professional film could be prohibitively expensive. Lambeth Borough Council's plans to make a film to 'foster a wider knowledge of municipal affairs', eventually had to be abandoned because of the estimated £3-5,000 cost.³⁵ In such cases the COI's attempt to foster amateur film-making was a potentially helpful policy. This solution was also

³¹ PRO MH 79/597 Film Programme Committee, 3 May 1949.

³² PRO MH 79/597 Film Programme Committee, 3 May 1949.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ PRO MH 79/597 Film Programme Committee, 7 June 1949.

³⁵ PRO BW 4/39 O.L. Roberts, Town Clerk (Borough of Lambeth) to A.J.S. White (British Council), 11 July 1946. To get around this problem they invited nine other South London boroughs to join them and then approached the British Council for financial assistance. The Council would not help them but did offer to show them a print of their film *Local Government*, and the possibility of distributing the Lambeth film abroad.

proposed by Progress, which encouraged NALGO members and local amateur film units 'to lend their services towards projecting local government'.³⁶ Despite all this encouragement to make 'films for a purpose', as before the war most amateur filmmakers preferred to produce mini dramas and family-centred travelogues. Amateur films such as *Neighbourhood 15* (1948), *In the Dark* (about the council, by a Lambeth librarian) and *Taken for Granted* about the Middlesex sewerage system were the exceptions.

The Manchester film: *A City Speaks* (1947)³⁷

The first and one of the most ambitious local films to be produced after the war, was *A City Speaks*, financed by the Manchester Corporation. The film is relevant here because although its original intention was to promote civics, it came to be an important tool to elicit interest and support of Mancunians in the redevelopment of Hulme.

The idea for a film to celebrate the centenary of the incorporation of the city as a Municipal Borough, was first suggested before the war when it had been common to produce films to mark such events. These were generally modest productions which concentrated on the ceremony of incorporation itself, sometimes supplemented with a brief record of the area, and the promotion of local businesses which had probably helped

³⁶ Progress, 7 (1950).

³⁷ *A City Speaks* (1947), pc: Films of Fact; dir: Paul Rotha; asst. Dir: Francis Gysin; commentary writers: Walter Greenwood, Ara Calder-Marshall, Paul Rotha; commentators: Valentine Dyll, Dereck Guyler, Alexander Grandison; Players from the Unnamed Society, music: William Alwyn, 68mins.

to fund the film. A good example is the Stretford incorporation film, *Borough of Stretford* (1933).³⁸

By contrast the Manchester civic film had much broader aims, and was to be funded completely from Corporation funds. Demonstrating the Corporation's level of commitment to film, it was agreed that in addition to this all encompassing 'key' film, shorter films would be produced later on to cover other aspects of the city's work or its development. The Finance Committee was also fully aware that it was unlikely to make much income from this type of film, but was nonetheless willing to recommend a cost of £10-15,000 to the Council in order to fully realise the Council's original aims.³⁹

The civic film was the idea of Alderman Wright Robinson, a leading member of Manchester's ruling Labour party and the President of the Manchester and District Film Institute Society. The main aim of the film was to promote citizenship and civics among locals, particularly the young, reflecting the wartime enthusiasm of many in the Labour movement for awakening popular political consciousness. Indeed, as one can see from the preamble by the Corporation when instructing the Finance Committee to investigate the film in May 1943, it was perceived that in Manchester this awakening was taking place.

In view of the widespread demand on the part of senior pupils in our schools, members of youth centres, and the fighting and

³⁸ Produced by Town and Country Films, it is held at the North West Film Archive. Another example also held at the NWFA is the Oldham incorporation film (1949).

³⁹ Minutes of the Civic Film Committee, 'Report of the Finance Committee on the Civic Film' pp. 2-3, Manchester Library, Local Studies Archive.

defence services in and around Manchester, for knowledge of local government and community plans....the cost of a film or films showing the civic activities of Manchester with special regard to furthering the aims of democratic control and good citizenship' ought to be investigated.⁴⁰

The film also expressed the Corporation's pride in its achievements in much the same way as *The Londoners* (1939) had done for the L.C.C. The Council's press statement announcing its decision to embark on the film, expressed pride to be the 'first city in Britain, and perhaps in the world to use the art of the documentary film to explain to its citizens their rights, privileges and responsibilities'.⁴¹ As an indication of the project's importance, the Film Committee recruited an impressive array of talent to produce the film. Paul Rotha who had advised at the planning stage was given the role of producer. Walter Greenwood, the author of *Love On the Dole*, was appointed as a script-writer to give 'a proper literary flavour to the dialogue and plot',⁴² and the score was specially composed by the celebrated William Alwyn and played by the local Halle Orchestra.⁴³ The prestige and importance of the film was such that during negotiations about the orchestra's fee, the Halle was so determined to do the work that they finally agreed to play for the original lower and disputed fee budgeted by the committee.⁴⁴ Even Sir John Barbirolli, the conductor, agreed to be paid a nominal sum.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Report of the Finance Committee on the Civic Film, 12 August 1943, p. 1, Manchester Library, Local Studies.

⁴¹ Press Statement in the Minutes of the Civic Film Special Committee, meeting of 8 December 1944.

⁴² Civic Film Special Committee, meeting of 20 March 1944.

⁴³ William Alwyn began composing for documentary films in the 1930's but by the mid 1940's was also writing scores for features. He wrote the music for a number of Paul Rotha's films, including *World of Plenty* (1943). His feature work includes *The Way Ahead* (1944), *The True Glory* (1945), *The Rakes Progress* (1945), *The Odd Man Out* (1946), and *The Fallen Idol* (1948).

⁴⁴ Civic Film Special Committee, meeting of 29 May 1945.

⁴⁵ Civic Film Special Committee, meeting of 17 May 1946.

Local pride and excitement in promoting the city on film was shared by the press. The Manchester Evening News talked of the city being ‘immortalised’ on film and was flattered that Paul Rotha ‘one of the greatest documentary artists of our day, has consented to produce a film of Manchester’.⁴⁶ Alderman Wright Robinson was praised for his initiative:

Alderman Wright Robinson is to be congratulated on bringing one of his children to the borders of maturity, for the idea of filming Manchester is a child of his fertile imagination. Like other proud citizens, he believes not only in the Manchester of the past, but in the Manchester of the future. He repeatedly urged us to choose the finest modern means to declare that belief, by producing a worthy civic film, so that the world would know why we possessed such pride in our city and could more readily accord agreement with our conclusions.⁴⁷

The history of the Corporation and instruction in civics makes up around thirty minutes of the sixty-eight minute film. This depicts the Corporation as a great reforming institution, established to tackle the chaos, human misery and pollution created by the city’s industrial expansion. The history of the Corporation since 1838 is followed by an explanation of how local government and democracy actually operates, and the people’s role: how they vote, who is eligible to be a councillor etc. As well as a diagrammatic explanation with Isotypes, the mechanics of local government is fleshed out by scenes of councillors debating in the council chamber, and views of various council projects and achievements particularly its role in health, welfare, education and housing.

⁴⁶Manchester Evening News, 24 March 1944.

⁴⁷Manchester City News, 24 March 1944.

As the film was designed in part to interest and educate the young, children featured in much of it. In the first scene a boy is viewed exploring the town hall, tiptoeing reverently past statues of two city fathers Joule and Dalton. He heads for the information bureau, at which point a commentator with a north country accent begins to recount the story of the city. In the hope of inculcating an active and inquiring attitude in the young to local politics, the commentary goes on to suggest that children could sit in the public gallery of the council chamber to watch the proceedings: 'tomorrow's young citizens can watch what happens to learn for the future'. Later the young Mancunian is advised to adopt a position of sceptical enquiry towards local politics and 'poke your nose into the city's affairs'.

At the films inception its main purpose was to promote citizenship, but as the project developed it became strongly orientated towards the city's reconstruction. At the planning stage it was decided that it should avoid being an historical travelogue, as it 'was primarily to cover the present and to look to the future'- 'a film of Manchester as it is and as it will be'.⁴⁸ To explain the Corporation's operations and the city's democratic history, special attention was paid to the reconstruction programme. To demonstrate the work of the council behind the scenes for example, film was shot of the planning committee in session. This focus was hardly surprising. Manchester had had a serious housing problem for many years, in 1939 one report found that Manchester had 68,000

⁴⁸Civic Film Special Committee, meeting of 21 July 1944, 'Inclusion of Historical Items'.

slums which were unfit for habitation.⁴⁹ At the end of the war, housing was considered such a priority that the government allowed resources to be diverted from civil engineering and infrastructure projects, such as the new airport. The work of the Special Film Committee cannot have failed to be affected by the importance of this task. When it was preparing its accounts for the Corporation's estimates at the end of 1946, it received a message from the Finance Committee that all committees were 'to bear in mind the urgent need for concentration of available resources of labour and material primarily upon the housing programme, and to include provision in their estimates only for expenditure which is likely to be incurred within the year'.⁵⁰

In the end around twelve minutes of the final film was devoted to the Corporation's reconstruction plans, concentrating on the scheme to redevelop the old slum area of Hulme along the lines of Wythenshawe, Manchester's 'garden city'. The main purpose of this section was to provide a response to those Mancunians frustrated with the housing shortage. To acknowledge this frustration and give authenticity to the Corporation's response, local voices interrupt the commentator's measured description of the housing programme to interrogate council policy. For example, when the commentator states the link between health and housing a voice interrupts, 'Aye, we know that but what have you done about it'. Later, the voice cuts in again, 'Aye, so what's happened, are you going to leave them standing there for another fifty years'.

⁴⁹ Derick Deakin (ed.), City Urban Redevelopment, Wythenshawe, Vol. 2, 1926-1984., (Manchester, 1984), p. 122.

⁵⁰ Civic Film Special Committee, meeting of 27 November 1946.

As well as publicising the housing programme, the film tackled two controversial consequences of the Hulme scheme. Firstly, that in order to reduce overcrowding in Hulme people would have to be moved to the city's outskirts. The scale of this emigration is made clear to the viewer, the commentator stating that the population must be reduced to 27,000, meaning that two thirds of Hulme's 84,000 people will have to move out. Later the commentator asks whether people will be willing to undergo this disruption in order to create a city of 'light and space and air'. A voice is heard to complain: 'Well I'm not going to shift. I've lived in the city all my life'. This contrived interruption was an accurate reflection of local feeling. Wartime surveys of Mancunians living in older parts of the city found that they were worried about moving away from the central areas with the amenities, industry and employment, despite a widespread desire for better housing.⁵¹ The commentator replies, 'So have all the others but we can't have it all, not if we want the better way of living. So you must make up your mind'.

This sequence underlines the powerful links between post-war urban reconstruction programmes and the need and desire to involve people in this process. In order to manage such massive disruption to people's lives it was necessary to gain their approval and support. It was believed that those who were actively involved or at least interested in local politics, those who were 'good citizens', would be more likely to accept the negative consequences of reconstruction because they understood the issues

⁵¹ Deakin (ed.), Wythenshawe, p. 124.

involved and appreciated the bigger picture. More cynically, by staging a dialogue between 'locals' and the commentator (who represents the council) it appears that the people and the council have actually decided together to introduce the redevelopment scheme. In fact as the central and repeated definition of local government in this film stated, the Corporation's actions were the expression of the people's will: 'We are fond of saying about them up at the town hall that they're doing this and they're doing that. But really it's we who are doing it...we put the councillors there'.

As in other cities, the proposed expansion of local government activities, especially the urban redevelopment programme, would be expensive and indirectly affect the rates. As a local is heard to say: 'Aye, but what about the brass'. After a factual explanation of the expansion of council spending, with the aid of Isotypes and views of a council finance meeting in progress, the film-makers chose to explore this controversial issue by creating a dialogue between the Corporation and the people, this time by staging a dramatised argument in a pub.

In the pub two old men are found complaining about a rise in the rates. They are challenged by a young man who defends the Corporation. His argument is that the revenue from the rates is not squandered, as the money will be used to benefit the city by paving roads, building drains, building houses and making other improvements. He explains that because the money is pooled, Mancunians get good value for the rates. He argues that people only tend to take an interest in the Corporation when it affects their

pockets, urging them to take a closer interest in local politics and government. The scene ends with the three men agreeing that most citizens are so disinterested and apathetic about local government that they only notice when it affects the rates: ‘We have to decide this, all of us’.

Demonstrating a theme and approach used in other local films of the period, such as *Neighbourhood 15*, children are used symbolically in the reconstruction scenes. The route to school taken by a boy in Hulme and another in Wythenshawe is compared to demonstrate the benefits of urban redevelopment, and in another scene a group of children are shown inspecting the planning exhibition for Hulme. The idea behind this scene, explained Rotha, ‘was to link symbolically the aspirations of Manchester’s youth with the future of the city’.⁵²

When the time came for the screening of the cutting copy, officers of the Corporation and others viewing the film were divided about the emphasis on urban redevelopment. One section of the Corporation thought the film dwelt too much on the city’s problem areas, in particular the ‘sordid’ slums of Hulme, and too little on the people who contributed to the city’s culture and business management and industrial life.⁵³ The City Treasurer characterised this as ‘an over-emphasis on the extremes of Manchester life’.⁵⁴ However, those Corporation officials responsible for addressing these

⁵²Manchester Guardian, 11 September 1945.

⁵³Civic Film Special Committee, ‘Town Clerk’s (Dingle) report’, meeting of 16 January 1947, p. 83.

⁵⁴Civic Film Special Committee, ‘Town Clerk’s report’, meeting of 16 January 1947, p. 83 (opposite side).

problems were glad the film was not afraid to face the facts of life. The Medical Officer of Health thought that 'the first picture of the slum house was perhaps not the best introduction, but generally the film resulted in first class public health propaganda'.⁵⁵

But the film was not solely concerned with housing and social reconstruction. The Corporation saw it as an opportunity to present Manchester as a vibrant, modern, industrial city, in order to arrest the decline of the region associated with the depression of its traditional industries of cotton and engineering. Emphasis was put on the Corporation's contribution to the economic success of the city, by citing investment in business and infrastructure projects such as the Royal Exchange and the Manchester Ship Canal. One councillor C.B.Walker, after reading the August 1945 treatment of 'The Manchester Civic Film', made some telling suggestions to enhance the film's advertising potential. Firstly, he asked that the section entitled the 'Voice of Industry' stress the city's international export trade: 'As the film is also for propaganda abroad, shipping to South America might also be emphasised'. Secondly, he wanted the scale of Manchester's business to be illustrated by the inclusion of figures which detailed the number of transactions conducted by Manchester's clearing banks. Thirdly he suggested that film of the 'Ship canal docks', which was located thirty-eight miles from the sea, be covered, a proposal that was included in the final film.⁵⁶ In the end, approximately thirty minutes of the film was devoted to Manchester's industrial and economic history and its

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶ Marginalia by councillor C.B. Walker on the 'Amplified Story-Treatment of The Manchester Civic Film', 23 August 1945, pp. 1-2, & 20, Folder 3, Box 10, Rotha collection, UCLA.

prospects for the future. In particular, the last reel emphasised Manchester as a centre of scientific and industrial innovation possessed of a highly skilled and motivated industrial workforce.

Interestingly the Corporation's desire to present a modern and scientific image of the city came into conflict with Paul Rotha's stereotypical view of Mancunians as warm-hearted, cloth-capped sages. In the key pub scene, members of the Film Committee insisted that Rotha allow the actors to use their own voices rather than adopt a dialect as was suggested in the script.⁵⁷ Similarly they disagreed over the kind of voice which should be used for the main commentary, initially rejecting Rotha's proposals for a 'northern voice' to be the commentator, such as Wilfred Pickles.⁵⁸ Instead they asked Rotha to approach Laurence Olivier, Ralph Richardson, Leslie Mitchell or Leslie Banks, all southerners, well known and even characteristically upper-class.⁵⁹

The film presents the plans for the social and economic reconstruction of the city as two closely related programmes. In the last reel, the commentary describes the city as being on the threshold of a new world and a new kind of industrial revolution of science and technology. But this time the people have learnt from the past, and there will be none of the misery associated with the industrial revolution: 'The night is over and the world is ready to be fresh again'. There are shots of slums but the commentary reassures us that

⁵⁷Civic Film Special Committee, meeting of 17 May 1946.

⁵⁸ To give an idea of the stereotypical nature of Rotha's suggestion, Wilfred Pickles was recruited by the BBC in 1941 as a 'Northern voice' to read the news.

⁵⁹Civic Film Special Committee, meeting of 1 July 1946.

‘in our new city they will have no place. For our new fight is the good life. For the lesson of the past will not be forgotten.... let us not forget that this is our city to make of it what we will’. This reflected the Corporation’s view that urban redevelopment and improvements in the social environment and welfare of the people went hand-in-hand with the city’s economic reconstruction. The city’s surveyor and engineer P.Nicholas who wrote the Manchester’s plan of 1945, wanted to build a more spacious and rational environment to improve people’s lives and in order to encourage the new light industry, thus preventing the city and the north west region’s further decline and drift of population associated with the depression of its traditional industries of cotton and engineering.⁶⁰

As has been suggested at the beginning of this case study, an important but unstated aim of the film was to promote the achievements of the Labour-run administration beyond the city. To achieve this aim it was fortunate that Alderman Harry Thorneycroft, the Labour M.P. for Clayton, was able to organise a private screening of the film at the Palace of Westminster cinema, where Manchester politicians could show off to representatives of other metropolitan councils. As Thorneycroft said, he was ‘particularly anxious that members from other parts of the country shall see what Manchester has done and shall be stung with envy’.⁶¹ Thus he was very pleased that over fifty people had turned up to see the show on the 22 February 1947, and particularly that there was a high representation of MP’s from other cities and industrial areas such as Leeds, Plymouth and Spen Valley.

⁶⁰ D.Deakin, Wythenshawe, p. 120.

⁶¹ Manchester Guardian, 17 July 1947.

Manchester's civic pride and the vanity of the corporation officials and elected members connected with the film, was given full expression at the opening night of its commercial run (11 August 1947) which was a glamorous and lavish affair, where the 750 Corporation seat-holders (the cinema had 2916 seats) mixed with the film stars laid on by the Rank organisation.⁶² A souvenir programme was printed and Corporation buses toured the city advertising the film. There was also a display of photos in the foyer showing 'Manchester's growth in its principal undertakings'. The Police band and the Halle Orchestra played 'The Ride of the Valkyries' (a theme used in the film) as the guests assembled and finally, Rotha filmed them arriving.⁶³

Despite this auspicious opening and the interest in the film shown at the Westminster screening, the Civic Film Committee was disappointed to hear that Rank had decided not to extend its commercial run to their other circuits further afield, giving the reason that 'the film was not of sufficient entertainment value for exhibition in their circuits'.⁶⁴ When the film was 'trade shown' none of the other renters expressed any interest in booking it. The failure to secure nation-wide commercial distribution, meant that the Committee was unable to recoup the film's sizeable production costs. However the Corporation had not made the film for commercial reasons, and could console itself with the fact that a limited commercial run was still a unique achievement for a locally-

⁶²*A City Speaks* ran commercially in the Manchester area till the end of October.

⁶³Civic Film Committee, Premier of *A City Speaks*, meeting of 28 July 1947.

⁶⁴Civic Film Special Committee, Town Clerk on theatrical distribution at the meeting of 29 October 1947.

produced film and enabled its maximum possible exposure in the Manchester area. Distribution to the fifteen Rank cinemas in the locality meant a potential audience of 25,666 at each screening.⁶⁵ On top of this, the film secured a wide non-theatrical distribution. The COI's re-edited and shortened 16mm version of the film was in continuous demand. From the end of November 1948 to the end of February 1949, the CFL took ninety-seven bookings, over a fairly wide geographical area. The COI itself showed the film through its regional offices in Lancashire and Cheshire to sixty audiences.⁶⁶ As we know it also became a part of central government's official film programme on local government. In terms of the wider publicity, the film was also given two television broadcasts.⁶⁷

Therefore, the Civic Film Committee is to be congratulated for producing a film that had such a wide local and national exposure. Reports from people involved in local government were enthusiastic about its effectiveness as a tutor in civics. The Town Clerk of Montrose, who had shown a copy to the Council and friends reported 'that it was received with great appreciation and proved very instructive.....it was a film which reflected great credit on the Corporation of Manchester in many respects and was well worth a wide special exhibition'.⁶⁸ The PRO for Blackpool who had shown it to a group

⁶⁵Civic Film Special Committee, Town Clerk's report on the distribution of the civic film (20 June 1947) presented to the meeting of 23 June 1947.

⁶⁶Civic Film Committee, Town Clerk's report on non-theatrical distribution of *A City Speaks* (13 April 1949) to the meeting of 25 April 1949.

⁶⁷The BBC edited the film to an hour and added an introduction and screened it in March 1948 and on the 2 January 1949.

⁶⁸Civic Film Committee, Philip B.Dingle (Town Clerk) quoting from a letter from the Montrose Town Clerk of 5 January 1949, to the meeting of 25 April 1949.

of NALGO members and the local WEA, reported that the film had been ‘very well received’ and recommended that it be ‘shown to all young people in order to try and promote interest in local government and civics’.⁶⁹ Reviewers from Manchester’s press were less enthusiastic. The Manchester Guardian said that the film was a slickly-made documentary, although a bit long and lacking in imagination. The reviewer noted that it was slanted towards the ‘problems of Manchester’s slums’ and its proposals on re-planning and the city’s medical care and brewing.⁷⁰ A common complaint was that it took a rather dour view of the city. In a letter to the Guardian’s editor, one reader argued that Rotha had missed ‘the real Manchester.....We deserve another film to correct wrong impressions. There is beauty in our city, especially in the suburbs for those with eyes to see it’.⁷¹ Another reader objected to Rotha’s gloomy view ‘after all there are places in our city besides slums and the council houses in Wythenshawe’.⁷²

It is likely that people interested in local government would have been more enthusiastic than school children and other ordinary members of the public. But it is fair to say that the film provided a clear explanation of the mechanics of local government which by focusing on a specific city provided additional interest, particularly in the north west. Contemporary evaluations of the film indicate that it was regarded as a valuable teaching aid.

⁶⁹Civic Film Committee, Philip B.Dingle quoting from the COI report to the meeting of 25 April 1949.

⁷⁰Manchester Guardian, 28 July 1947.

⁷¹Manchester Guardian, Edith P. Hewett to the Editor, 16 August 1947.

⁷²Manchester Guardian, Maude R. Fleeson to the Editor, 23 August 1947.

Turning to reconstruction, again the film's wide local distribution undoubtedly helped to get the message across that the Corporation was doing its best to meet the housing shortage. How well this message was received we do not know. We also do not know whether those people of Hulme who were opposed to being moved to outlying districts treated this disruption with any more equanimity as a result of watching *A City Speaks*. But we know that certain sections of Manchester's population would have greeted the film's glowing portrayal of Wythenshawe with derision and thus been cynical about the promises for Hulme's redevelopment. While Rotha was filming the scenes in the council chamber, there was an invasion by protesters from Wythenshawe bearing a 10,000 name petition complaining about the lack of basic social amenities in the 'garden city'. Apparently one of the placards asked 'Sir, Wythenshawe needs a Post Office'.⁷³ Indeed it is acknowledged that the drive to build houses in the suburb had not been matched by the construction of schools, shops, a hospital, and other facilities vital to creating an integrated and balanced community.⁷⁴ In fact up until the 1950's and 1960's Wythenshawe residents had to travel to neighbouring boroughs for most of their needs.⁷⁵

In some respects this question is not relevant because due to a shortage of resources and planning powers it was not until 1955 that the city's slum clearance programme was started, nearly five years after active local distribution of the film had ended. More significantly due to the changing of government subsidies in favour of tall

⁷³ Deakin, *Wythenshawe*, p. 153.

⁷⁴ Deakin, *Wythenshawe*, p. 131.

⁷⁵ Wythenshawe's first primary school was not opened until 1950; its first fire station in 1957; and first police station in 1953.

apartment blocks and the shift in design preferences, the final character of Hulme's rebuilding was different to that proposed in the film. Instead of a garden city approach as in Wythenshawe, with houses with gardens for families, as well as flats, the scheme completed by 1972 adopted system building techniques and was dominated by twenty storey apartment blocks and deck access buildings, connected by high-level walkways. These produced to be a disaster. Condensation was common to many buildings and the concrete slabs on the sides of the buildings were insecure. The deck access blocks, which were designed to replicate the community living of the old terraced streets, actually led to alienation of tenants.⁷⁶

Finally, interest in *A City Speaks* may have had little to do with its subject matter. Although many Mancunians flocked to see the film, as one perceptive observer remarked, much of their interest was the chance of seeing themselves: 'Thousands will doubtless be searching for glimpses of themselves as potential actors or "extras" in this pageant of their own domain. (The cine-camera makes all of us vain to see ourselves momentarily as others see us)'.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ HMSO, *Manchester: 50 Years of Change*, (1995), p. 39. Bentley Housing Estate was constructed in Hulme in the 1940s but after that no more building took place until 1955. The Hulme Estate was built in less than eight years and comprised 5,000 homes, 3,000 of which were deck access. At the time it was the biggest concentration of this type of housing in Europe.

⁷⁷ *Manchester Evening Chronicle*, R. Walker, 'A City Speaks and what is left unsaid', 12 August 1947.

Neighbourhood 15 (1948)

Neighbourhood 15 is one of the few amateur films to be produced for local government, in this case about the plans of the West Ham council to rebuild the borough within the overall parameters of the Greater London Plan. West Ham had acute housing problems long before the war had begun. Industry and the construction of the docks had produced heavy overcrowding by the turn of the century, mostly concentrated in poor Jerry built homes in the south of the borough. Although there had been suburban expansion in the north of the borough in the 1890s, the 1930s saw further overcrowding across the borough with a density of 4.6 persons per room recorded in 1931.⁷⁸ There was also little council house construction, only 2,000 homes being built before 1939. In fact the borough had no tradition of charitable tenements built for the working-class, common to neighbouring areas like Tower Hamlets.

The war had exacerbated the housing problem. West Ham suffered particularly badly from the blitz, 14,000 houses were destroyed completely (27% of its housing stock) and a further 2,000 were damaged beyond repair. In 1941 the Labour Council began actively planning the reconstruction of West Ham. The plans being drawn up by Thomas E. North who was given the unusual dual role of Borough Engineer and Architect.

North also worked with Abercrombie on the drafting of the Greater London Plan, and his plan for West Ham was described as one of the first local authority schemes to be

⁷⁸ Patrick Dunleavy, *The Politics of Mass Housing in Britain. 1945-1975*, (1981), p. 207.

drawn up within its guidelines. North's plan divided the borough up into sixteen self-contained neighbourhood units. The film focuses on the development of one of these units Neighbourhood 15, an area in the south of the borough roughly corresponding to the old Tidal Basin. Each unit was to have a population of 10,000 people with an overall density of 100 persons per acre. This would require a reduction in the borough's population from 254,000 to 165,000. This population surplus was to be decanted to an over-spill town - probably Ongar. Common to other schemes, industry was to be separated from housing and located to the south west of the borough (Silvertown and Stratford).

In Neighbourhood 15 all dwellings were two stories with individual gardens or three stories with communal gardens. There was one experimental four storey block. Although as Stanley Reed, the director, points out, in the model featured in the film there was 'a cluster of imposing towers rising as high as the Tate and Lyle block and affording much the same panoramic views'.⁷⁹ In the end one tower block was built on the edge of the estate in the early 1960s, called Abraham Point.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ From a draft of Stanley Reed's autobiography kindly made available to Toby Haggith in 1993, p. 46. Stanley Reed (1911-1996) started his career as an English teacher in West Ham, introducing a pioneering film appreciation class. In 1951 he joined the BFI as its first education officer, becoming Director of the Institute in 1964, remaining in this post until his retirement in 1972.

⁸⁰ Tom North was not against using high flats and in his final version of the plans for West Ham these were to be present at a ratio to houses of 1:3. However, until the 1950's the government subsidy structure made flats over 4 stories too expensive. The council also objected to high flats on principle. See Dunleavy, Mass Housing, p. 211.

The Neighbourhood was to be self supporting with two new primary schools, shops, seven pubs (half the pre-war number) a doctor's surgery and an estate officer. The council also made an order for eight acres of land for recreation and it was intended to build a communal hall, a cinema and swimming pool.

Architecturally the housing on Keir Hardie estate in Neighbourhood 15 was in a British vernacular style with double pitched roofs atop brick houses. In short the layout and architecture of Neighbourhood 15 as a whole was of the English garden suburb. In fact as the Mayor, Mrs Gregory, remarked she hoped to be present at the opening of West Ham's garden city.⁸¹

The process of planning in the borough mirrored events at a national level. The heavy destruction caused by the blitz encouraged the majority Labour council to set up a Town Planning Committee in 1941 to begin to plan the reconstruction.⁸² As in other cities, West Ham councillors were enthusiastic about plans to rebuild the borough along much more progressive lines, rebuilding not just the physical fabric but the whole community. In October 1942 the Mayor, Mrs Gregory had asked 'are we going on with the old system, or are we the people going to carve out for ourselves a new civilisation'.⁸³ In May of the same year, she urged that the borough's reconstruction be ambitious:

⁸¹ Barking and West Ham Express, 29 May 1942.

⁸² According to Arthur F.G.Edwards, a West Ham councillor at the time and of long-standing, the chairman of the Town Planning and Reconstruction Committee, and key member during the drawing up of the West Ham Development Plan, was councillor Fox. Unfortunately he died on the eve of its unveiling and was replaced by Councillor Rawlinson, who is seen in the film as the chairman. From a letter from A.Edwards to T.Haggith, 15 April 1994.

⁸³ 'Reconstruction after the War', Barking and East Ham Express, 2 October 1942.

We have to demand not only a better standard of life, but the right to live in beautiful places, not elaborate extreme houses, but labour saving houses where each child shall have proper sleeping accommodation, with surroundings where children may go out and play in fields, and gardens, not be shut in places without sunlight and daylight.⁸⁴

There was also pressure on the council from local people to prepare a proper plan. In March 1942 the frustration and resentment of the people was aired during a meeting of the local trades council, during which the Borough council was accused of dragging its feet on house construction while still taking rates from people in patched up bomb-damaged houses. Instead the Reconstruction Committee should reveal its plans.⁸⁵

The council was keen to interest the people in local plans, partly to deflect this frustration that things were not being done quickly enough. In May 1942 the Reconstruction Committee arranged for a travelling exhibition called 'Living in Cities' to be put up for two weeks, in council buildings. This pictorial display was supplemented with a film show, lectures and a section devoted to photographs of recently cleared sites in the borough. On opening the exhibition the mayor Mrs Gregory hoped that this would get the people 'town minded'.⁸⁶ She also expressed a concern, which was shared by planners and local politicians nationally, that the people must be educated and motivated about urban reconstruction in order to ensure that after the war such plans would not be still-born: 'The people who lived in these streets must also help themselves. There was

⁸⁴ Barking and East Ham Express, 29 May 1942.

⁸⁵ Barking and East Ham Express, 6 March 1942.

⁸⁶ 'Living in Cities Exhibition', Barking and East Ham Express, 25 May 1942.

such a thing as the voice of the public ... Have we been too complacent in the homes we lived in?'.⁸⁷ In West Ham this interest and enthusiasm seems to have been shared by the people, as 10,000 locals visited the exhibition.

By the summer of 1944 Tom North's plans for reconstruction were ready, but local councillors had begun to express doubts about how much of them would come to fruition as they did not know of government intentions.⁸⁸ Indeed at Central Government level there had been a retreat from an earlier, apparently more expansive position on reconstruction. And the Town and Country Planning Act of November 1944 was disappointing to most authorities, as its financial conditions would make ambitious schemes which incorporated large open spaces too expensive to pursue as seen in West Ham.

By the end of the war these fears had turned to frustration, as the Ministry of Town and Country Planning took nearly a year to confirm the Council's request to purchase land for redevelopment in the Tidal Basin. Council building projects were also held up by a shortage of building materials and skilled labour, a problem facing most local authorities. Even the erection of 143 pre-fab hutments was held back by a shortage of vital internal fittings.⁸⁹ And common to some other areas of Britain, there was a spate of vandalism. Fifty pre-fab huts were damaged, and 1000 slates belonging to a local

⁸⁷ 'West Ham as Garden City-Mayor's Vision of the Future', Barking and East Ham Express, 29 May 1942.

⁸⁸ Barking and East Ham Express, 30 June 1944.

⁸⁹ 'Housing Delay for Lack of Fittings', Daily Telegraph, 20 May 1946.

builder were smashed.⁹⁰ The council was forced to requisition 2000 empty houses in 1945 to try to alleviate the crisis. The following year the situation deteriorated further as returning ex-servicemen and war workers swelled the population by 46,000 in eighteen months, increasing problems of overcrowding, forcing some people to squat both within and outside the borough.⁹¹

The delays in reconstruction meant that many residents continued to live in dangerous patched-up, blitzed properties until late into the 1940s. One resident slammed his door shut one morning only to see one side of the house collapse.⁹² Naturally the people most frustrated by these hold-ups were the locals, a Reynolds News reporter quoted a resident outside Plaistow station complaining: ‘Why don't I see any bricks and mortar yet’.⁹³ At the opening ceremony for the first house to be inhabited on the Keir Hardie estate, a scene featured in the film, one woman onlooker was so frustrated that she interrupted the proceedings shouting ‘We want homes not show houses’, and ‘We were bombed out of here- who’s having this home?’⁹⁴

Development proceeded slowly after the war, but by 1948 the council was faced with even greater problems. At the end of the war, the government had agreed to supplement the rates for an extra year because of the devastation in West Ham. But in 1948 this ended and rates were pegged at the 1939 level. West Ham was particularly

⁹⁰ ‘Prefab. Vandals’, Daily Mirror, 24 April 1946.

⁹¹ The Times, 10 September 1946

⁹² Evening Standard, 31 March 1947.

⁹³ Reynolds News, 3 February 1946,

⁹⁴ Barking and East Ham Express, 11 April 1944.

vulnerable in this instance because a high proportion of its buildings were occupied by industry which was liable to only 25% of the rates, and dock areas which paid no rates at all. The council wanted to increase the rates of pensioners and caused anger when they raised the rents on some of their properties. In February 1948 some council tenants were facing repossession as they had refused to pay rent on homes they considered to be uninhabitable. As new building could not be paid for out of revenue, the council had to raise its funds through expensive bank loans of sixty years.

Although there was great frustration with these delays in reconstruction there does not seem to have been much opposition to the council's reconstruction plans as such. In local elections in 1945 and 1947 the manifestos' of opposition parties to the ruling Labour council did not criticise the plan itself but aspects of its implementation. Even the Conservatives pledged their support for the plans and commitment to preserve open spaces. The Conservatives also conceded that national policy was largely to blame for the meagre housing construction so far achieved. But in common with the Ratepayers Association, they blamed the council for giving too many building contracts to the West Ham Works Department, and inefficient organisation of building projects. The Conservatives also argued that too many resources were being squandered on temporary pre-fabs.⁹⁵ The Communists also treated housing as its most important issue. Their manifesto for the municipal election of 1 November 1945, was not against 'temporary

⁹⁵ Election leaflet of the Ratepayers Association on behalf of councillors Mrs R.M. Lennox and J.C. Lowe, Borough Council Elections, 1945. Borough Council Election leaflet issued by the Conservative party for their candidate Olive E. Hannan, for polling day 1 November 1947. 'Citizens of West Ham: Socialism has Failed', Conservative manifesto for the municipal elections of 12 May 1949. Newham Local Studies Archive, (Stratford Library).

hutments' and they encouraged greater use of methods of pre-fabrication, but they stressed the urgency of the task facing the council with imminent demobilisation bringing heavy demands on existing housing. Therefore they said it should speed up its work to repair damaged houses and prepare the land for the development of Tidal Basin (Neighbourhood 15).⁹⁶

The council did its best to publicise the plans for reconstruction. It mounted two exhibitions in 1946, and Tom North himself was active from 1944 addressing local groups on the plans. But it was clearly under pressure to produce more effective propaganda to describe and explain the work it had planned and was undertaking. In 1947 North approached Stanley Reed with the idea of making a short film on his plans for the borough's reconstruction. Reed was a teacher who taught a pioneering course in film appreciation in West Ham schools, and was a member of a local amateur film society. He recalls that Tom North wanted the film to inform the people of West Ham about the council's reconstruction proposals and to reassure them that the 'new town would not be a mere rebuilding of the old, but a transformation, with a new street layout and a different style of housing'.⁹⁷

Tom North had used slides to illustrate his talks to local people about the plans for the area, so he was aware of the value of audio-visual aids. As Reed recalls, North

⁹⁶ Communist Party election leaflet for Fred Benton, candidate for the High Street ward, October 1945. Newham Local Studies Archive.

⁹⁷ Stanley Reed's draft autobiography, p. 41.

believed film would be a superior way of communicating his plans to the locals of West Ham, and be of particular use in communicating with children: 'a film he felt, would serve this purpose better than platform talks or exhibitions, and could be shown in the schools as well as to adult audiences'.⁹⁸ The West Essex Film Society agreed to take on the project.

The Unit was well acquainted with the documentary and short propaganda idiom. Before the war it had existed mainly as a film appreciation society, organising monthly screenings of 16mm documentaries and other films borrowed from the BFI. Both West and East Ham had a thriving alternative film circuit. As these were Labour boroughs it was possible to see Russian films such as *Road To Life* shown in East Ham town hall, and *Mother Earth*. Films of the Spanish Civil War were also shown, organised by the Co-Op and run in their building in East Ham. The WEEFS did produce a few of its own films, such as one on the local coronation celebrations in 1936. As one of its members knew the Bernsteins (Granada cinema owners'), members were able to screen this film in the local Granada cinema. During the war all the WEEFS production efforts ceased, as it was difficult for amateurs to obtain film stock. When the group revived after the war it concentrated on film production and, urged on by Stanley Reed, moved into the education field, making two financially successful films, one on the rules of Netball and the other on Lacrosse.

⁹⁸ Stanley Reed's draft autobiography, p. 41.

In January 1947 the Town Planning and Reconstruction committee agreed to recommend funding for the film and an initial £150 was put forward.⁹⁹ It agreed to dispense a further £200 in September 1948.¹⁰⁰ The completed film had its first public screening on the 2 September 1948, in the council chamber.

Neighbourhood 15 was scripted and directed by Stanley Reed in close consultation with Tom North. The other members of the crew were Dan Gladwell, a printer with photographic skills, John Brockes, and George Still who had become a professional cameraman. All the shooting was conducted at weekends and evenings as the crew all had full-time jobs. As a result Tom North had to arrange for building workers to be on site at weekends for shots of construction, and for evening sessions with staff at the architects' department.

The film took over a year to make and kept pace with the building of the Kier Hardie estate, the main residential area of Neighbourhood 15 and the first area in West Ham to be rebuilt as part of the reconstruction plans. This area had suffered particularly heavy bombing during the blitz. The amount of devastation actually made it much easier to develop as very little demolition was required and most of its resident population had been forced to move out. The council started with a clean slate, and its application for to the Ministry of Town and Country Planning for compulsory purchase of the 47 acres of

⁹⁹ West Ham Local Council Committee Reports, 1946-7, Vol. LXI, minutes of a meeting of the West Ham Town Planning and Reconstruction Committee, 8 January 1947, p. 263. Newham Local Studies Archive.

¹⁰⁰ West Ham Local Council Committee Reports, 1948, Vol LXIII (B), minutes of a meeting of the Town Planning and Reconstruction Committee, 16 September 1948, p. 1186. Newham Local Studies Archive.

the Tidal Basin in June 1945, was one of the first applications to be submitted by a local authority under section 2 of the 1944 Town Planning Act.

The film's structure is similar to that found in war time films on town planning and urban renewal. It begins with a descriptive historical survey of the two inherited problems of West Ham's environment, which resulted from its unplanned growth: the close proximity of houses to industry, polluting the environment with foul-smelling smoke and the nineteenth century jerry-built slums for the local dock and factory workers. This is followed by an attack on the monotonous drab inter-war suburban architecture. We are then shown how the destruction of the blitz has provided an opportunity for West Ham to rebuild and plan along more humane lines; an opportunity seized by the local council. The rest of the film describes Tom North's plans for redevelopment, and then closer inspection of the work in progress at the Keir Hardie Estate in Neighbourhood 15.

Neighbourhood 15 was made in a documentary style. In his autobiography, Stanley Reed expresses his admiration for the Griersonian documentary school and their debt to the Russian cinema. However, he confesses that although this project was ‘to make a film and not an illustrated lecture’ their ambitions were artistically modest.¹⁰¹ Significantly Reed was keen to stress that this film’s style was dictated by the need to communicate with its specific audience- the people of West Ham.

My own low-flying venture worked within familiar narrative conventions in an idiom readily comprehensible to the people of West Ham, aiming to meet Tom North's immediate need to secure sympathy and approval for the drastic environmental changes he intended.¹⁰²

In order to make the film more accessible Tom North adopted a slight cockney accent when his voice was recorded for a section of the soundtrack. Reed did the same when improvising some commentary for a demobilised soldier now working as a brickie on the building site of Keir Hardie estate.

This more informal and human approach to the film’s subject is also achieved by using a local female teacher to give us the usual lesson on the history of the town's development. In most other films on town planning this part of the story is related by an invisible commentator, or in the case of *Proud City*, by the pompous figures of Abercrombie and Forshawe. For similar reasons it is a local boy who guides the viewer around the area. This is a particularly good way of explaining the reasons behind West

¹⁰¹ Stanley Reed’s draft autobiography, p. 43.

¹⁰² Reed draft autobiography, p. 44.

Ham's reconstruction in an un-patronising manner. The boys involvement also underlines another key message:

The transformation of the whole of West Ham will not reach completion for more years than it is yet possible to estimate. And so it is fitting that the central players of the film are not planners, architects or councillors - but the children of West Ham's back streets.

This theme is movingly suggested with shots of the children playing in West Ham's rubble, powerful reminders of the urban devastation suffered by many European cities and similar to Rossellini's celebrated neo-realist films *Rome Open City* (1945) and *Germany Year Zero* (1947). The symbolism of the children's disregard for their bleak environment, in fact their evident pleasure at the boundless playground provided by the bombing, gives hope for the future. The reward for adults lies not in the immediate delivery of a new environment, but the consolation that their children's West Ham will be an infinitely better place. As the commentary concludes: 'The new West Ham is not for our generation but for Roy and Harry's, for what we can plan, they will enjoy'.

There was also a deliberate attempt to make the planners and the scheme more localised and accessible. Tom North is shown as a hands-on planner, talking to men on the building site. The camera angles are generally close to the action, at eye level, in the street and in the market, giving an intimate, familiar view of West Ham's life. The people featured in the film are not actors but people who live and work in the borough. Harry, the boy featured in the film, went to the school in Silvertown, the people at the ceremony to open the first house, and the brickies on the site are all locals. The Councillors who

meet to discuss the plan for West Ham's reconstruction, are also the actual men and women of the Borough Reconstruction Committee who turned up on a Sunday morning at the Town Hall to film the Committee Meeting. But the film could hardly be said to patronise its viewer. It does not skirt over any of the details of the plan, crediting its audience with a high degree of local knowledge.

Neighbourhood 15 became for the council the principal way of publicising its housing programme to locals, being shown at fifty-three screenings between 1948 and 1952. Among the groups to be shown the film were the Upton Ward Labour Party, Canning Town and Grange Ward Association and the West Ham Chamber of Commerce. It is difficult to gauge its local reception but one report noted that the people of the Keir Hardie estate who attended a screening at St.Luke's church asked for a repeat showing.¹⁰³

Although originally made for the locals, it was realised by the council that the film could be a valuable tool to lobby central government for funds for West Ham's reconstruction.¹⁰⁴ Two months after its first public showing it was viewed by a party of local government representatives from Germany, accompanied by a Home Office official, who visited the borough in December 1948.¹⁰⁵ The film was also shown at the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, and so impressed the Minister Lewis Silkin that he arranged for a special screening in December at the House of Commons; the day after the

¹⁰³ Thomas E.North, FRIBA, 'Rebuilding in Dockland', Town and Country Planning Journal, 68 (1949), p. 210.

¹⁰⁴ Letter from Stanley Reed to Toby Haggith, 24 April 1993.

¹⁰⁵ 'German Visitors to West Ham', The Borough of West Ham, East Ham, Barking and Stratford Express, 3 December 1948.

discussion of West Ham's reconstruction in the House.¹⁰⁶ According to Reed, the House of Commons show was well attended and the film warmly received.¹⁰⁷

Neighbourhood 15 continued to have a wide showing to many groups, particularly those concerned with planning such as RIBA, The School of Planning Club, and the Bournville Village Trust. RIBA was particularly complimentary:

The photography is of a very high order, some of the shots being exceptionally fine. The commentary is clear, logical and stimulating, so that interest is maintained throughout the film. A convincing film which would give the layman an excellent idea of how the planner works and a clear indication of the achievements to be expected. The film is the more remarkable in that it is not professionally produced.¹⁰⁸

In November 1949 a print was sold to the COI for inclusion in its non-theatrical catalogue of films on town planning.

Although the film raised the profile of West Ham, and particularly the prestige of Tom North with the West Ham council, and among his profession, it cannot be said to have led to the council receiving any special treatment by the Ministry of Town and Country Planning.¹⁰⁹ The low-rise housing and garden city layout of North's plans that

¹⁰⁶ 'Mr. Silkin Sees West Ham Film, Ministry Officials were Impressed', The Borough of West Ham, East Ham, Barking and Stratford Express, 14 December 1948.

¹⁰⁷ Reed autobiography, pp. 44-45.

¹⁰⁸ 'Review of Films 16', RIBA Journal, 2 (1950), p. 156.

¹⁰⁹ Arthur Edwards argues that the representation to the Government for assistance did not go unanswered as it promised that the planned new town of Basildon would be reserved for decanting residents from West Ham and East Ham. To underline this commitment, Mrs. Knight from East Ham, and Mrs Gregory from West Ham were made members of Basildon's new town corporation. But 'The Promise of Basildon to relieve the housing problems of West Ham was not kept'. Letter from A. Edwards to T. Haggith, 15 April 1994.

are shown in the film were not repeated, as Reed points out, the film is an ironic record of a 'brave new West Ham' that was not to be.¹¹⁰ Neighbourhood 15 was the only part of the borough to be redeveloped in this way as restrictions created both by shortages of money and lack of suitable large bare sites led to piecemeal development elsewhere. Moreover, due to changing government subsidy arrangements in the 1950s there was an increasing use of high flats. These proved to be unpopular with residents, and more disastrously badly designed, with Ronan Point partially collapsing when there was a gas explosion in one of the flats in May 1968.¹¹¹ As a consequence its twin Abraham Point, built in Neighbourhood 15, was considered unsafe and lay empty for several years before being demolished in the Summer of 1992.

The problems of Neighbourhood 15 cannot simply be attributed to the tower blocks. As happened in many other urban redevelopment schemes, the hopes of West Ham councillors to build a 'new civilisation' in the Tidal Basin for West and East Ham's slum dwellers were thwarted. Lack of resources meant that many of the social amenities planned to create a self-supporting community were never realised, and the unemployment as a result of the decline of the docks exacerbated the area's problems.

The motivation behind Glasgow's films parallels that of West Ham. In the immediate post-war years, Glasgow suffered a severe housing shortage. The return of ex-

¹¹⁰ Reed autobiography, p. 46.

¹¹¹ Abraham Point the first of the Taylor Woodrow-Anglian system blocks, identical to Ronan Point, was opened on 18 November 1967.

serviceman and war workers to the city could not be contained by the existing inadequate and overcrowded housing stock. As a result, and in common with other areas, many people took the initiative and there was widespread squatting. Although, Glasgow Corporation tried to overcome the problem, building 62,000 new houses between 1945 and 1961, this could not match the housing need, and by 1949 the waiting list had reached 90,000 families.¹¹²

As in West Ham the council realised that many Glaswegians were probably unaware of the housing work being undertaken. Councillor M'Innes of the Housing Committee, at a preview of the film *Progress Report*, attributed 'the feeling of frustration over housing' to the fact that 'most of the Corporation's building activities were on the outskirts of the city and were thus not seen by many people'. Consequently 'the film was no "airy-fairy" attempt at propaganda, but a genuine desire to let Glasgow people know something about housing activities'.¹¹³ The Corporation took this project so seriously that it even managed to persuade the local branch of the Cinema Exhibitors Association to agree to distribution of the film in the city and surrounding area.¹¹⁴ Normally the CEA were unwilling to screen locally-produced 16mm documentary films which they regarded as propaganda or which they thought were likely to bore audiences, but on this occasion they agreed because *Progress Report* had 'no political bias', and more significantly dealt with a subject which was 'of great public interest'.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Andrew Gibb, *Glasgow: The Making of A City*, (1983), p. 164.

¹¹³ 'Housing Frustration Explained', *Glasgow Herald*, 4 December 1946.

¹¹⁴ 'Housing Progress Film', *Glasgow Herald*, 23 December 1946.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Councillor George Smith, ex-convenor of the Housing Committee, thought the film a ‘useful’ project and suggested that the Housing Department should revise it from time to time, to bring it up to date with housing progress in the city.¹¹⁶ In fact the Corporation was so keen on film propaganda that it went on to produce a sequel to *Progress Report*, *Progress II* (1948) followed by *Our Homes* (1949), *Our City, Today and Tomorrow* (1949) and *Glasgow-Today and Tomorrow* (1949).

Conclusion

A City Speaks and *Neighbourhood 15* were very successful in fulfilling their subsidiary role of promoting the achievements of these Labour-controlled council’s to politicians in rival metropolitan areas and the wider public sphere. The desire to publicise local achievement was not restricted to film from Labour authorities as Glasgow’s films attest. Nor was it a motivation restricted to films from big cities, as civic pride was of particular importance in the production of *A Home of Your Own* (1951) about Hemel Hempstead new town and *A Planned Town* (1947) about Welwyn Garden City. The Hemel Hempstead Development Corporation was so concerned to be unique among new towns in producing a film that it tried to tie the production company DATA to a controversial clause preventing it from working for other local governments.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Glasgow Herald, 23 December 1946.

¹¹⁷ 95th Data meeting, 9 June 1948, 4/20/13, Donald Alexander and Budge Cooper Papers. Scottish Film Archive.

The success of the films locally in assisting with the process of reconstruction is harder to assess. They were certainly successful in plain terms of publicising the local schemes as there was very wide local distribution. What little evidence we have from local government officials suggests that they thought the investment had been worthwhile. Reports from PR officers about the value of film in encouraging interest and participation in civic affairs and reconstruction programmes were very positive. A packed house of nearly 500 people at the new Stretford Civic Theatre for a film programme on local government (*Local Government; A City Speaks*; a silent film of Stretford; and ‘some light educational films’) led George Smith, the PRO, to enthuse that ‘The film carefully selected and properly presented can penetrate the thick Trojan walls of civic apathy’.¹¹⁸ Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, Bristol’s PRO, G.Morley-Davis, claimed that ballots of audiences showed that films ‘dealing seriously and constructively with important social subjects were found the most popular, and in local government topics education, town planning, and child welfare headed the poll’.¹¹⁹

However, we do not know whether audiences were attracted by the films or the shows themselves, as PR officers made great efforts to turn the screenings into fun events. Without access to independent audience surveys we only have the PR officers evidence and it is understandable that they were keen to promote the success of their own efforts. But it is all too easy to dismiss these reports and thus the possible impact of films

¹¹⁸ *Progress*, 5 (1952), p. 212.

¹¹⁹ Out of the fifteen films screened the seven most popular in order were *Children’s Charter*, followed by *Proud City*, *Home and School*, *A Start in Life*, *Children on Trial*, *Fair Rent*, and *Charley’s March of Time*. *Progress*, 3 (1948).

on the reconstruction process. Reconstruction, particularly the efforts to address the housing shortage, was very important to many people. In addition, direct attempts to publicise council activities to the local electorate were a rare phenomenon. For this reason locally screened film shows would have been a novelty and probably not received with the weary cynicism of today.

It is clear that the main intention behind the local films was to win approval for the schemes proposed, publicise house-building and overcome possible opposition to specific schemes. Unlike wartime films *Neighbourhood 15*, the Glasgow films and others were able to show footage of the results of the plans in progress as opposed to using library footage of garden cities and 1940s housing developments, or concentrating on shots of the model and encouraging us to imagine what the new towns would be like. As a result, scenes of building sites, houses being erected, new tenants moving into council homes and ceremonies of the new houses being occupied are common to all the films. The Glasgow films are the crudest in this regard, the commentary is full of statistics of homes completed, views of quick-build techniques and assurances about the commitment to overcome the shortage. In this respect the local films are similar to the housing items in the commercial newsreels, which cover the opening of estates of houses around the country and stories about the application of science and technology to the race for homes. Whether the films succeeded in calming frustration over the housing shortage or winning approval for reconstruction schemes, as has been shown, is hard to evaluate. But reports of protests by people in West Ham and Manchester (coincidentally during filming) show

that for many the films would have had little or no effect on their attitudes. In Hemel Hempstead *A Home of Your Own* (1951) was not successful in quelling the considerable local opposition to the new town, in fact the making of the film incensed locals.¹²⁰ The announcement by the Corporation of its intention to produce the film was greeted with ‘public indignation’ according to the Hemel Gazette which described it as ‘Development Corporation propaganda’.¹²¹ As a result of this fuss, a councillor who was given the job of assisting in the making of the film, issued a statement distancing himself from any propaganda element contained in the eventual film.¹²² In November 1950 after a debate on the subject, Hemel Hempstead’s Borough Council passed a resolution refusing to participate in the filming.¹²³ In common with other films, DATA wanted to film councillors and new town officials in session during a debate on the town, but the council refused to take part and so the Corporation officials were filmed on their own.¹²⁴ However, the film was more successful in its secondary role of promoting the town and encouraging people to apply to live there. *A Home of Your Own* opened at the Festival of Britain cinema on the 13 July 1951. After its South Bank run it played for three weeks in two West End cinemas before being shown at 100 cinemas in the London area and a further 150 in the outer London suburbs for the rest of the year. It was well received by reviewers. In August 1951 it was revealed that there had been about 10,000 applications

¹²⁰ *A Home of Your Own* (1951), sp. HHDC, pc: DATA. dir: Tony Thompson, pr: J.D.Chambers, ph: Ron bicker, cam. op: John Gunn, ed: Robert Kruger, ass. dir: Basil Somner, cast: George Wilson: Harry Locke, Jenny Wilson: Joan Biske, black and white, 20 mins.

¹²¹ Hemel Hempstead Gazette, 22 September 1950.

¹²² Councillor Mayo was chairman of the Hemel Hempstead Council of Social Services, which was given the task of helping DATA with the film.

¹²³ Hemel Hempstead Gazette, 3 November 1950.

¹²⁴ Meeting of 24 October 1950, CNT/HH, Box 7, Papers of the Hemel Hempstead New Town Corporation. Hertfordshire Record Office.

from people living in Acton, Willesden and Wembley who wanted to move to the town.¹²⁵ As a footnote, *A Home of Your Own* was such a good film that it even managed to impress the Hemel Gazette which said the film made ‘an excellent impression’ and praised its production team, perhaps contributing to the mellowing of the paper’s hostile attitude to the new town.¹²⁶

The fact that the films were produced reveals a new sensitivity to the opinions of the electorate. This was particularly so in the case of the Labour-controlled local authorities which were considered to be the most committed to public relations.¹²⁷ Titles from Labour councils also showed greater commitment to involving the people in reconstruction and respect for their views. *Neighbourhood 15* and *A City Speaks* provided detailed information about council redevelopment schemes, and couched this in a language and cinematic style that it was believed talked directly to the locals without patronising them. This trend can be explained by a number of factors: the extended post-war franchise; the campaign to revitalise local democracy; the fact that council housing was now a right for all; the affect on the rates of costly reconstruction schemes; and

¹²⁵ Tom Price, a ‘scrapbook’ of Gazette items on the new town. (ed.) Hemel Hempstead-New Town Years, 1947-97: The Gazette (Hemel Hempstead, 1997).

¹²⁶ Price Hemel Gazette, Part 13.

¹²⁷ PRO HLG 52/1398 Alex Spoor (NALGO) to Fife-Clark (MOH), 21 December 1948. In the letter Spoor expresses his concern at the opposition of local authorities to public relations which they regard as ‘a device for spending rate-payer’s money on political propaganda of the majority party’. He thought this attitude mainly came from local Conservative parties, possibly because the Labour party officially commended the NALGO report on local government PR and because ‘as a whole Labour majorities have been more active in the adoption of public relations than have conservative majorities’. Although he noted that similar opposition had been expressed by Labour minority parties when Conservative majorities adopted PR campaigns.

specifically, the contemporary wisdom among planners and politicians, that it was both practically and morally wrong to foist reconstruction schemes on the public.

Conclusion

This study has offered a valuable understanding of a fascinating group of films and their significance during a particularly important period of British reconstruction. One is struck by the idealism and earnestness with which film-makers, planners and politicians collaborated to produce films on this subject. And while we are impressed with the power which was accorded to this medium, the films themselves have added to the current revision of reconstruction history notably by showing that the ideals of those responsible for re-building Britain were much more democratic than is often alleged.

The methodology employed in the research has shown that it is possible to blend an examination of the film 'text' with a rigorous analysis of the conventional sources of mainstream history, and as a result gain greater appreciation of the history of both film and reconstruction. It is to be hoped that students from both disciplines will see that although such a two-pronged analysis is sometimes very difficult, it has generally provided valuable insights, aside from being, for this author, exciting and challenging. This methodology has its parallels in art history, particularly for those working in the decorative arts. Researchers in this field have also begun to use this approach when examining, for example, the history of metalwork, in a particular period. They have realised that a purely aesthetic and stylistic approach to the study of objects can become a rarefied and unsatisfactory pursuit and have thus been drawn increasingly to search out evidence about the production process and the context in which an object was made, sold and used.¹

¹ Philippa Glanville, Silver in England (1987), p. ix.

In describing the history of the films of the inter-war period the first chapter has shown how wide was the interest in using this new medium to promote slum clearance, architecture and to a lesser extent town planning. Alongside the involvement of the bigger organisations, such as RIBA and the Housing Centre, a number of smaller housing charities and pressure groups commissioned their own films. Examination of these films made by groups other than the documentary film movement has tended to underplay its importance. Historians have given the impression that housing and planning were first used as film subjects because of the initiative of documentary film-makers.² While Paul Rotha, Mary Field, and others were important in helping architects, planners and other housing reformers to present their concerns on the screen, the initiative for films did not always lie with them, nor were they the only producers of film, and they invariably relied heavily on the experts for the intellectual and technical details of a script. These findings are confirmed by the work of Tim Boon on the use of film in the presentation of science and public health. He explains that the scientific and public health movements formed alliances with progressive film-makers to produce propaganda on issues such as smoke pollution and he concluded that film should be seen as a product of ‘negotiations and agreements’ between reformers and experts in ‘a much broader community than just documentarists’.³ Studies of the inter-war films has helped to put into perspective the kind of propaganda messages found in official films of the Second World War and later;

² See John R. Gold and Stephen Ward, ‘Of Plans and Planners: documentary film and the challenge of the urban future, 1935-52’, in D.B. Clarke (ed.), The Cinematic City, (1997), p. 62.

³ Timothy Boon, ‘The Smoke Menace: Cinema Sponsorship and the Social Relations of Science in 1937’, in Michael Shortland (ed.), Science and Nature: Essays in the History of the Environmental Sciences, (Oxford, 1993), p. 61. See also his work on the *World of Plenty* (1943). ‘Agreement and Disagreement in the making of *World of Plenty*’ in David F. Smith (ed.) Nutrition in Britain: Science, scientists and politics in the twentieth century (1997).

notably by showing that the overtures to democratic planning found in the later films were a new departure.

This study has also shown that although some film-makers and building professionals were keen to peddle their own propagandist message in official films, they were not given a free hand. Chapters two to four have contradicted the view of historians such as Pronay that wartime films on reconstruction were subversive propaganda. In fact, film-makers working on reconstruction of the built environment operated within a very constrained context both in producing and distributing the films. Perhaps more surprisingly, these constraints did not just apply to film producers working for government departments. Those working for commercial sponsors were often frustrated to find that they were not entirely free from the control of the state's propaganda officials, and that their new sponsors could be as cautious and conservative as those from the MOI had been. Securing distribution was even more difficult when producers had to tackle the artistically and politically unimaginative commercial industry unaided. The battles fought by Rotha and others with government officials and film distributors provides a colourful addition to the growing body of evidence challenging those historians who believe in the idea of wartime consensus.

After the war the debate on reconstruction seemed to have been settled. New towns were now government policy and a large urban reconstruction programme promised. This did not lead, as some have suggested, to a decline in interest in planning films.⁴ Although films on the house building campaign became increasingly important,

⁴ Gold & Ward, 'Of Plans', p. 77.

civil servants and film-makers remained keen to produce films to explain the government's planning policy and involve people in the process. However, in the end due to financial restrictions and changing priorities the output was small and often prosaic. Ironically the film-makers also found that although many in government were sympathetic to the kind of radical messages they wanted to present, they were even more politically restricted at the COI than they had been under the MOI. This was largely a reflection of the government's wish to appear responsible and respectable and its avoidance of overtly radical messages that could, for example, whip-up class conflict. Battles between film-makers and officials were also a manifestation of a more general conflict between those who thought the world had gone far enough to the left or who had come to realise that the British people were not yet ready for out and out socialism and had to be led very gently along a socialist path. Chapters five and six also provide a slightly different perspective on the difficulties film-makers had at the COI. The contention of Rotha and others has been that they were unable to produce radical and imaginative films because of the bureaucratic nature of the COI and the conservative opposition of people such as Denis Forman and Ronald Tritton. While bureaucratic difficulties were certainly a severe constraint and officials such as Tritton and Forman objected to the attempt to put an overtly socialist message in films, this is not the whole story. Many imaginative film ideas actually stemmed from COI officials such as Mackie, Forman and de Mouilpied. Moreover, while they were not left-wingers, they certainly supported Labour's aims for the built environment and often displayed a disarming idealism in their pet projects about the kind of world they hoped would be built. Another issue which has not often been discussed is that some of those film-makers who had been so prominent under the MOI were no longer producing imaginative and

fresh ideas to interpret such a difficult subject as reconstruction. The examples of local films in chapter seven shows how the Labour government's commitment to encouraging active democracy and citizenship was enthusiastically supported around the country, and in particular the commitment to these ideals in the reconstruction process.

Government officials were often sensitive about film propaganda on reconstruction because it entailed having to make some kind of public statement about policy which was not clearly established and in many cases controversial. As a result the films seem to be bold on the problems of Britain's built environment but more cautious about what to do about them, and there was no discussion of controversial issues such as how landowners should be compensated for land taken over as a consequence of redevelopment. It followed that officials preferred films which presented options for discussion rather than those promoting a particular policy. It was not until the end of the war, when indications of the direction of government policy were clear, that the film *Town and Country Planning* (1946) could make such unequivocal statements on national planning and propose the widespread construction of satellite towns to relieve the congestion of the cities. Thus the research presented here accords with the views of Gold and Ward that the film treatment of the issues of planning broadly followed the official consensus.⁵

A number of different ways of presenting reconstruction were adopted during the war but one clear message throughout is that planned reconstruction should entail the

⁵ Gold and Ward, 'We're going to do it right this time': cinematic representations of urban planning and the British new towns, 1939-51', in S.C.Aitken and L.Zonn (ed.) *Place, Power, Situation and Spectacle: A Geography of Film*, (1994), p. 6 of the authors m.s.

active participation of ordinary people. This became an increasingly important element in the films and was underlined in official catalogue descriptions that drew attention to the producers' intentions.⁶ Some have argued that this portrayal was not an accurate reflection of the planning process at the time, implying that it was just a propaganda technique to mobilise support for radical reconstruction.⁷ This would be true if the films were just a reflection of the prejudices and idealism of film-makers. However, as has been demonstrated, such views came out of a commitment expressed by Ministers such as Reith and Morrison, individual advisors such as Gilbert McAllister, pressure groups such as the 1940 Council Film Committee, the Housing Centre and the Bournville Village Trust, and planners such as Thomas Sharp, Max Lock, Charles Reilly and the sociologist Otto Neurath.⁸ This stress on democratic planning was itself a reflection of a more enlightened movement that regarded a sociological approach to planning as absolutely essential. This approach had grown out of an awareness of the problems that were associated with earlier slum clearance schemes. Perhaps another reason for the

⁶ For example the description of *New Towns for Old* includes 'The responsibility for the future rests finally, not with expert planners, but with every citizen'; *The Plan and the People*: 'the question is raised of which are most necessary- flats, houses or open spaces; and the public's responsibility in determining the issues is emphasised'; *Housing in Scotland*: 'Scotland's housing plans are being framed to meet opinions obtained by the Scottish Housing Advisory Committee from men and women in the services and in the factories'; *New Town (Charley)*: 'This film shows in a light fashion how a community can set about replanning a town'. From the Central Film Library catalogues for 1948 & 1956-7 pp. 89-90 and p. 210 respectively.

⁷ Nicholas Pronay, 'Land of Promise: the Projection of Peace-Aims in Britain', in K.R.M. Short (ed.) *Film and Propaganda in World War II*, (1983), p. 70.

⁸ This aspect of planning was echoed in the work of organisations such as the Housing Centre which laid on a number of events to bring the ordinary people into the planning process. In the Centre's 1942-43 annual report it was explained:

One direction in which the Centre's services are being increasingly required is as a forum for the expression of individual ideas and a neutral platform on which government officials and ordinary citizens, experts and layman can meet.

An example of this was a lunch time Brains Trust between men from an Anti-aircraft Command and housing experts: 'to express to the experts their opinion on what future housing standard the ordinary man in the army required for himself and his family'.

emphasis on this aspect of planning was because this was one area around which consensus was possible. Moreover, democratic participation, both to ensure that Britain was rebuilt and to help with the design of that reconstruction, accorded so well with wartime propaganda rhetoric of a ‘people’s war’.

These conclusions about dialogue contradict the work of Gold and Ward, who, while acknowledging that overtures to participation were included, imply that it was not a significant strand, stating that interest in using film to strengthen participation in the planning process did not occur until the 1960s.⁹ Instead they stress the presentation of planning as a scientific and professionally-led activity,¹⁰ an emphasis which arose both from the need to make the idea of planning more cinematically engaging and the change in role and status of the planner to the position of a ‘master planner’ who interpreted the preliminary survey work, now common to town planning, and designed the final scheme.¹¹ While this is certainly true of films such as *The City*, *Proud City*, and the post-war title *Houses in the Town* it ignores many films that invited the people’s involvement such as *New Towns for Old*, *When We Build Again* and *The Plan and the People*.

The fact that films portraying both these approaches to planning exist, as well as titles in which both elements can be found, needs some more explanation. Among the architectural and planning fraternity there was disagreement about the degree to which people should be involved. Some believed that it was enough to publicise and explain the plans, leaving it up to the professionals to design them, while others argued that the

⁹ Gold & Ward, ‘Of Plans’, p. 77.

¹⁰ Gold & Ward, ‘We’re going’, p. 14 and pp. 30-31.

¹¹ Gold & Ward, ‘Of Plans’, pp. 73-74.

people should be closely involved in the whole design process.¹² The films reflected these tensions and lack of consensus. In those where a more elitist approach is shown the involvement of the people appears limited to learning about, approving and finally exercising its political muscle to endorse the plans. But as has been demonstrated, even some of these make reference to the people's wider involvement. Similarly in *When We Build Again* there is an inherent contradiction between the scenes of the housing survey and a later moment, which has been highlighted by some commentators, in which the hand of a planner (thought to be Thomas Sharp) is seen boldly rubbing out and replanning a slum area.¹³

As Gold and Ward correctly observe, the presentation of planning as a process led by dynamic and visionary professionals (*Proud City*, *The City*, *The Way We Live*) was also a tool adopted to make the subject more engaging.¹⁴ Indeed, Craigie herself conceded that she had chosen Abercrombie and Plymouth for her film because he was so good in front of the camera although she actually preferred the theories of Charles Reilly, whom she found a difficult character.

The reluctance of historians to accept representations of democratic planning as a reflection of genuine intent, is understandable given the pronouncements of some people involved with the films. Many planning propagandists were anxious that if the people were not mobilised behind the idea of national reconstruction the unique opportunity of

¹² Nick Tiratsoo, 'New Vistas: the Labour Party, citizenship and the built environment in the 1940's' in Richard Weight and Abigail Beach (eds.) The Right to Belong: Citizenship and National Identity in Britain, 1930-1960, (1998), pp. 144-5.

¹³ Gold and Ward, 'Of Plans', p. 74.

¹⁴ Gold & Ward, 'Of Plans', p. 71.

the times would be lost. This concern was expressed by the sponsors of *When We Build Again*, at its premiere.¹⁵ A journalist who reviewed the film saw its value in similar terms:

I would urge that the cultivation of a powerful and determined public opinion should be the main immediate objective of the movement. In the maelstrom of plans and programmes now competing for support in the midst of war's distractions, only those will achieve even a compromise realisation which command the understanding and support of a majority of the people.¹⁶

Paul Rotha who saw film as a tool to facilitate democratic planning,¹⁷ also wrote of the need for film to make people understand what town planning was all about:

Taking it for granted (a big risk) that it will be the technicians, the specialists and the technologists who will draw up the blue prints for our ways of living, then their immediate job is surely to prepare the people for a desire for as well as an acceptance of, this everyday approach to living ?¹⁸

Concern that the opportunity for reconstruction might be missed, became greater towards the end of the war. Part of the frustration of planners and film-makers was directed at the people for their apathy and apparent lack of interest in the subject. This is particularly noticeable in *The Way We Live* during the scenes in which the journalist tries to elicit the interest of locals in the Watson/Abercrombie plan. Craigie and Rotha's films are indicative of the dilemma facing propagandists. While they were committed to democratic planning, the priority was to get the people to support reconstruction so that the post-war government would not shirk its responsibilities. Thus, Craigie wanted *The*

¹⁵ *Municipal Journal*, 5 March 1943.

¹⁶ Hugh Pilcher, *Town and Country Planning*, 42, (1943) p. 74.

¹⁷ See his explanation of the use of planning films at the Architectural Association, *A.A. Journal*, April 1944.

¹⁸ 'Films for Planning', *Town and Country Planning*, 35, (1941), p. 87.

Way We Live to present the proposals for the rebuilding of Plymouth and to elicit the interest and involvement of the people in the political debates then occurring: but while she showed opposing views, she was clearly in favour of the plan and did as much as possible to promote it.

After the war people were even less interested in propaganda and the technical issues of planning. As a result there was an effort to present planning in a more human way. The films were also keen to show that the new schemes were not imposed, but a product of the people's will. Gold and Ward argue that those films which tried to get away from presenting planning in a technical and scientific fashion (for them the apotheosis of this trend was in *A Home of Your Own*) towards 'a more individualistic, and home-based conception of the future', actually illustrate 'a profound gap between the planners and society'.¹⁹ The implication was that film-makers and officials responsible for town planning had essentially accepted that people were not interested in or found it difficult to grasp the technical and theoretical issues involved. By acknowledging this, and thus grossly simplifying the issues, Gold and Ward believe the films are symbolic of a wider move to cut people out of the planning process. But they have based this conclusion upon a film which was produced independently of the COI and which was not necessarily typical, as shown in chapter seven. Other locally produced films did not patronise the public, affording them a theoretical explanation of planning.

¹⁹ Gold and Ward, "We're going to do it right this time": cinematic representations of urban planning and the British new towns, 1939-1951', in S.C. Aitken and L.Zonn (eds.) Place, Power, Situation and Spectacle: A Geography of Film (1994), p. 32.

The attempt to draw definite conclusions about the reception of films has been a frustrating and generally unsatisfactory pursuit. Apart from the old question about the difficulty of evaluating the impact of film on audiences, this exercise has been made more difficult by the time lag between the release of a film and the start of redevelopment and reconstruction projects. There is evidence that when films about the reconstruction of a town were screened in the town featured, they generated a lot of interest and even drew large audiences. But we cannot differentiate between those people who went out of curiosity to see the sights of their town, and the chance of spotting themselves, and those who were motivated by a wish to learn more about local reconstruction. Even if the majority went for the latter reason, or a quite likely combination of both motives, the available evidence does not suggest that as a result of seeing the films, a large number of people was mobilised to attend the local planning enquiry, besiege the town planners with criticisms and suggestions, and in other ways become involved in the planning process. It is also clear that it was Labour's commitment to build houses in general, rather than less tangible discussions about planning, that encouraged people to vote for the Party in the 1945 General Election. So although films such as *A City Reborn* or *New Towns for Old* may have had an impact on the people's political consciousness by reminding them that if they failed to exercise their political muscle adroitly, the promises for the post-war would be as empty as those of 1918, their support would be fairly muted.

This does not mean that the films were a total failure. In a small number of towns when they were used in conjunction with other forms of publicity such as scale models, exhibitions, and talks, they helped to contribute to a temporary enthusiasm for a

particular plan and in one town helped to overcome local opposition to the proposed new town. Unfortunately detailed local research was not possible in every case, and might prove fruitful in the future. In general, such films were not an overall success when distributed beyond the towns featured. This is partly because official government propaganda films both during and after the war, particularly on social and political subjects, were not well received by audiences, especially when they were screened in the cinemas. James Chapman moderates this view slightly by saying that MOI films were ‘on the whole quite well liked’ by audiences but he agrees that it is doubtful that they had any effect on people’s attitudes and behaviour.²⁰ Surveys by Mass Observation of the reception of MOI shorts showed that they had no impact on people’s lives.²¹ If they were effective, it was in providing information and instructions that were relevant for a short period only.²² This suggests that films on reconstruction would be much less effective because they discussed issues of no immediate relevance. The people went to the cinema for escapism and entertainment, and resented being preached at. This observation was pithily made by a writer on film in 1937 when describing the limitations of British documentary:

[because of the artistic poverty of documentary] you rarely see a genuine documentary film in a popular cinema. The miner does not want to see his own backyard and precious few viscountesses are interested in or care two hoots in hell about slum clearance.²³

This interpretation is reinforced by surveys of the preferences of cinemagoers conducted by the industry in 1946-7 which found that of short film subjects, those about

²⁰ James Chapman, The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939-1945, (1998), p. 112.

²¹ Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan, Mass Observation at the Movies, (1987), p. 11

²² Chapman, British at War, p. 113.

²³ Dallas Bower, Film in the Social Scene, (1937), p. 7.

‘Social Developments’ were the least liked.²⁴ But MOI films in general were at a disadvantage when screened in the cinemas as their production values seemed so poor in comparison to the commercial films. A Londoner, P.B.Ewing, who meticulously logged his impressions of the films he saw during the war, was often critical of the MOI shorts for their poor music, bad acting, weak commentary, use of familiar library material etc. *Food For Thought* produced this dismissive evaluation: ‘I wish the MOI would leave this sort of thing to the MGM, who turn out far better propaganda’.²⁵ By the middle of 1941, however, he was regularly making favourable comments about MOI films which accords with the generally acknowledged improvement in official output.

This particular problem was recognised by film-makers and officials at the MOI who therefore laid particular emphasis on the value and power of non-theatrical distribution. By any scale this became an impressive system of film distribution, bringing official films to people all around Britain, from remote rural locations to munitions factories with thousands of employees.²⁶ Central Film Library staff and historians have since cast doubt on the figures for audiences claimed at the time. For 1942-3, for example, rather than the figure of 18 million contemporaries stated, a more accurate estimate puts the total audience of regular viewers (i.e. those who saw official

²⁴ The Bernstein Film Questionnaire 1946-7, included a question ‘What kinds of short films do you like best? Patrons were asked to put ‘Like Very much’; ‘Like moderately’; ‘Dislike’, opposite eight categories. Social developments came bottom of the rank of eight film subjects, with science in seventh place and cartoons first. A tabulation of the replies saying ‘Dislike’ put ‘Social developments’ at the top. Held in the BFI Library.

²⁵ P.B.Ewing diary, 1 August 1940, comments on *Food For Thought*, seen at the Ritzy Neasden. The diary is held in the Cinema Museum.

²⁶ An indication of the size of this system comes from the figures for the number of cinema vans (or mobile units) which rose from 109 in 1941-42 to 144 in 1944-5, and reported audiences by the mobile units alone of 6,749,796 in 1941-42 to 8,950,799 in 1944-45. ‘Ministry of Information Non-theatrical distribution’, 22 February 1946, in Helen Forman (née de Mouilpied) Papers.

films three times) at nearer four million.²⁷ Although this is still a significant number, it represents a fraction of the commercial audiences.

As well as exaggerating the size of audiences, many film-makers overestimated the impact of the films themselves. Since very few of the reports of film reception compiled by MOI regional films officers, projectionists, factory welfare officers and others have survived (and none relating to films on the built environment), one has to evaluate their impact from a range of sources. Until the summer of 1944, complaints about the poor sound track and inaudible nature of many of the MOI's 16mm distribution prints meant that it was likely that the propaganda effect of some films was probably greatly lessened.²⁸ But that summer, improvements in printing, greater efforts by the team servicing the projectors, and more care by the projectionists had led to great improvements. In a report on reception for films screened in the North East, only three out of 1,300 accounts included complaints of indistinct speech or bad sound.²⁹ Even if the message was clear, how receptive were these audiences to the message? This is extremely difficult to answer. It is probably fair to say that people were less resistant to propaganda films when shown to them in the circumstances of a non-theatrical screening, than in a cinema where they went by choice, to escape the war, and paid. There were also numerous special screenings organised for particular groups where audiences would have been far more receptive, for example, the groups of mothers and tenants which it was proposed should be shown films on reconstruction when the end of the war was in

²⁷ The official figures come from 'Ministry of Information Non-theatrical distribution', 22 February 1946, in Forman Papers. The revised figures come from Swann, The British Documentary Film Movement, 1926-46, (1989), p. 169.

²⁸ 'The Cracked Voice of Propaganda', Documentary Newsletter, March 1943.

²⁹ 'Report on Reception of Films Used Non-Theatrically, January -May 1944', from Miss de Mouilpied, p. 1. Forman Papers.

sight. However, one must be sceptical of the MOI's claim to be creating a new trend for discussion:

The MOI's "Celluloid Circus" as it is affectionately known in the Ministry's Film Division is creating again the market place discussion; the public forum is returning to village and town alike with a new orator-film, to lead a lively and well-informed discussion of the country's wartime problems.³⁰

Other reports of the reception by industrial workers, a key group for reconstruction propagandists and the largest sector of the non-theatrical audience, are much less positive. In response to a suggestion from Budge Cooper that film-led discussion groups be started for young women factory workers living in government hostels, a regional MOI officer was not very encouraging. He warned Cooper that the women were unlikely to be very receptive as they 'are not interested in the news and they "resist" broadcasts except dance music. Some are despondent about post-war unemployment but the majority do not think'. He explained that they 'like freedom and money' avoided responsibility and were not very interested in the weekly WEA lectures in the hostel.³¹ Reflecting this understandably carefree outlook on life, a discussion at an MOI production conference on ways to improve the factory newsreel *Worker and Warfront*, included the suggestion that issues should include more human interest stories and cartoon items as these had been 'found very popular'.³² One also has to remember that MOI films screened during meal breaks had to compete with many distractions, and were frequently shown with a poor black-out.

³⁰ 'The MOI's "Celluloid Circus" Twelve months' achievements in the non-theatrical field', p. 1, 1940-41, Forman Papers.

³¹ Peter Joff (MOI NW Region) to Budge Cooper (Paul Rotha Productions), 25 January 1943, 4/20/89, Donald Alexander and Budge Cooper papers, Scottish Film Archive.

³² 'Production Conference with Film Officers, Held at the MOI on February 3 1943', Forman Papers.

It has not been possible to conduct as much research on the reception of films released during the post-war period so the following conclusions must be regarded as tentative. However, it is unlikely to have been different from the war. Despite the reports of more enthusiasm shown by commercial distributors for COI titles, there is no evidence that general audiences showed any great hunger for government propaganda and information films.

To repeat what has been stated elsewhere in the thesis, by the end of the war and for most of the post-war period, the need for a home was a primary concern of many, planning was of less interest as time went on, and after the war was even considered to generate hostility. Why was this so? From late 1940 to early 1941 there was enthusiasm and interest in planning, but this seemed to wane quickly and people looked ahead to a home not in a Reilly Village but as one Mass Observation report concluded, where people had privacy, a garden, their own front door and little contact with the neighbours.³³ Recent research on the BBC has suggested that interest in planning may not have declined as much as had been thought, as a series of nine radio talks over a three week period in March and April 1944 called 'Homes For All' received very high audience figures. However, although people were interested in the subject, they were extremely sceptical about the government's ability to produce the homes and

³³ An Enquiry into People's Homes by Mass Observation, (March, 1943), pp. 205-208. The authors of the report were particularly concerned at the implications of these findings for democracy. They noted that when asked whether people liked their neighbourhoods or not 'less than one in a hundred mentioned any form of activity that involved co-operation with their fellow citizens'. The attitude of housewives to their neighbourhoods had no respect for local government, their responsibilities to maintain their community etc. In fact they were not only passive as citizens, but 'often seemed unable to see further than the personal short-comings of their neighbours'.

communities promised. The feeling was that ‘They’ would let ‘Us’ down as they had done before in 1918.³⁴

Such cynicism would not make audiences receptive to many of the films described in the previous chapters. It also accords with general observations made about the apathy and even sense of helplessness shown by people when encouraged to participate in the planning process. Attempts in post-war Sunderland, for example, to elicit participation in an exhibition about a local redevelopment scheme, produced just thirty-six contributions to the plan.³⁵ A significant reason for this kind of disinterest, is that work on a scheme frequently did not take place until long after first publicised. This created an air of unreality about the whole enterprise, and made it impossible to sustain interest for the length of time needed to ensure that locals could make a substantial contribution to the design of the plans.³⁶ Such a fate befell a number of the projects featured in the films studied here, providing yet another reason for the lack of interest shown in planning films.

But there are other reasons that have traditionally made it difficult to involve people in planning. A feature of many of the post-war reconstruction schemes was their large scale, which tended to work against local initiative and consultation. A planning historian looking at urban redevelopment in Manchester and Leeds, found that it was not until the 1980s when a more decentralised planning model was adopted, that local people

³⁴ Siân Nicholas, ‘From John Bull to John Citizen: images of national identity and citizenship on the wartime BBC’, in Weight & Beach (eds.) The Right to Belong, p. 50.

³⁵ Norman Dennis, People and Planning, p. 348.

³⁶ Dennis, People and Planning, p. 350.

were more consistently involved in the planning process.³⁷ More depressingly, he found that although public enquiries, planning exhibitions and public design exercises did give local public a role in the planning process, greater involvement of people was achieved in Moss Side in 1981 as a result of the initiatives which sprang from the riots.³⁸

The planning historian Norman Dennis, observes that the working class wage-earner is more passive when it comes to the planning or changing of his/her urban environment than members of the salaried middle-class. This class, as has often been observed, is more confident and knowledgeable about the workings of the political machinery and the publicity tools necessary to make a real impact.³⁹ Recent attempts by architects and local government officials to encourage the involvement of tenants on deprived estates are showing that local skills and knowledge can be tapped to create better environments which reflect the desires of local people. A project in Hulme to re-house people displaced by the redevelopment of the 1960s deck access blocks, in which residents were given a major role in the design process (and significantly remained involved throughout), has been regarded as a success by residents and architects alike although the commitment to consultation prolonged the process and led to an overspend.⁴⁰ Of course such projects assume that people want to become involved in the

³⁷ Timothy Charles Marshall, 'Local Planning in Inner City Residential Areas, Studies of Leeds and Manchester, 1966-1986', (PhD thesis, Oxford Polytechnic, CNAA, 1990), pp. 114 -115 & p. 242.

³⁸ Marshall, 'Local Planning', p.243.

³⁹ Norman Dennis, *People and Planning*, pp. 348-9. Dennis cites the example of the Packington Estate where a largely middle-class community of tenants showed great skill and determination in getting their way in a local planning dispute.

⁴⁰ 'A Change for the Better', *Design*, Winter (1997-98). The 'Homes for a Change' project to provide 75 flats for people displaced by the redevelopment of four decaying deck access blocks built by the council in the 1960's called The Crescents (described in chapter 7), grew out of a conference of the same name in 1988 run by Shelter. One of the important contributions of the residents was not to get rid of all references to the deck access and concrete of The Crescents and the final scheme incorporates deck access. Charlie Baker, one of the residents involved in the scheme, explains why they rejected the Council's wish to design houses which rejected the earlier forms: 'We felt it could be throwing the baby out with the

planning process, but this is not always the case. In Hemel Hempstead in 1947 an exhibition of G.A.Jellicoe's outline plan for the new town, was designed to explain the proposals and also to gather contributions and ideas from the public.⁴¹ To do this, the exhibition included a scale model of the new town, and interviewers were on hand to record visitors' impressions and comments. These were then examined to see how they could be incorporated into the plans when detailed work began. However, one of the main irritations expressed by members of the public was the plan's lack of detail. As the Corporation's General Manager, W.O.Hart, commented: 'They appeared baffled by the fact that this plan was tentative and required their comment'. As a result he suggested that it might have been better to present the people with a 'fait accompli, not for comment but only for information'.⁴²

Returning to film, it is significant therefore that the most positive reports of the success of reconstruction films such as *Land of Promise* and *When We Build Again* came from screenings at film societies, groups of people who were generally middle-class, film-minded and planning-minded.⁴³ Films on the general topic of the creation of a better world such as *They Came To A City* and *World of Plenty* were popular, as were

bathwater- that it was almost as if the Council were saying that deck-access and concrete were the causes of crime. They should have accepted that there was a lot of energy in the community that was directed into unofficial areas, but which could have been harnessed in other ways'. The project cost £4 million, which was approximately £1million over budget.

⁴¹ The exhibition which ran for ten days in November 1947 had 6,476 visitors.

⁴² 'Hemel Hempstead Development Corporation Summary of Proposals and Criticisms Received as a Result of the Exhibition of the Outline Plan', by W.O.Hart, 27 November 1947, p. 3, CNT/HH, Box 7, PR1, Hertfordshire Record Office.

⁴³ Reg Cordwell who was the secretary of the Manchester and Salford Workers Film Society, found that despite attempts to attract members of the working-class and Labour movement, the audiences became dominated by intellectual and bohemian types, who were mainly teachers from the wealthier suburbs of Wythington and Didsbury. Cordwell even found that the owner of the factory where he was the shop-steward began to come to the screenings, driving from the works to the cinema in his limousine. Recording of an interview with Reg Cordwell held in the North West Film Archive.

films specifically on the built environment, in particular *Land of Promise*, which was occasionally screened with an introduction by the film's associate director Francis Gysin.⁴⁴

The effect of these films on middle-class audiences in general seems to have been greater. It was also only from respondents from this class that Mass Observation received positive reactions to MOI shorts,⁴⁵ as well as a preference for feature films with a stronger emphasis on social and political issues, such as *Thunder Rock* (1942).⁴⁶ *They Came to a City* (1944), Sidney Cole's adaptation of Priestley's play about the readiness of British society for a socialist utopia, did not suit popular tastes for fantasy, but struck a chord with a minority of well-read people. A munitions worker who was a regular cinemagoer, and whose tastes in reading matter reflected her socialism, was very moved by the film.⁴⁷ While film-makers and commentators at the time, grossly over-estimated the scale of enthusiasm for films which tackled social and political issues such as reconstruction, their impact on a minority of the middle-class public especially those concerned with such issues in general was much greater, and may be significant. It is easy to sneer at and be dismissive of films such as *They Came to a City*, *Land of Promise* and *Picture Paper* simply because they were idealistic and only popular with a predominantly middle-class audience. However, this type of audience often contained

⁴⁴ Francis Gysin introduced the film to the Dagenham Co-operative Film Society. *16mm Film User*, April (1947).

⁴⁵ Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan (eds.) *Mass Observation at the Movies*, (1987), p.425.

⁴⁶ Richards & Sheridan *Mass Observation*, p. 221.

⁴⁷ Mrs L. White, diary, 86/54/1, Department of Documents collection, Imperial War Museum. A further indication of her interests is revealed by a cutting from the Radio Times, detailing a play by Eric Linklater called *Cornerstones* about a discussion in the Elysium fields between Lenin, Abraham Lincoln and Confucius.

people who were politically active some even involved in reconstruction. This would be an interesting subject to pursue.

Regardless of the impact of the films their overall significance should not be dismissed. As we have seen, particularly in chapters five to seven, the fact that these films were produced shows how committed the Labour Party was, both nationally and locally, to involving as many people as possible in the creation of a socialist society, and in particular with the democratic approach to planning. The production of films, particularly by local government shows a high degree of imagination and ambition which is not always accorded to Labour bureaucracies. And, of equal importance, the decision to use film to publicise local redevelopment shows a concern with informing the public. Although the line between publicity and the wish to encourage participation in a particular scheme often became blurred, one cannot deny that the intention was a positive step towards democratic planning. Put simply, ordinary people cannot contribute or challenge a plan or scheme if they cannot understand it or do not know of its existence. The films studied here were serious attempts to provide such opportunities.

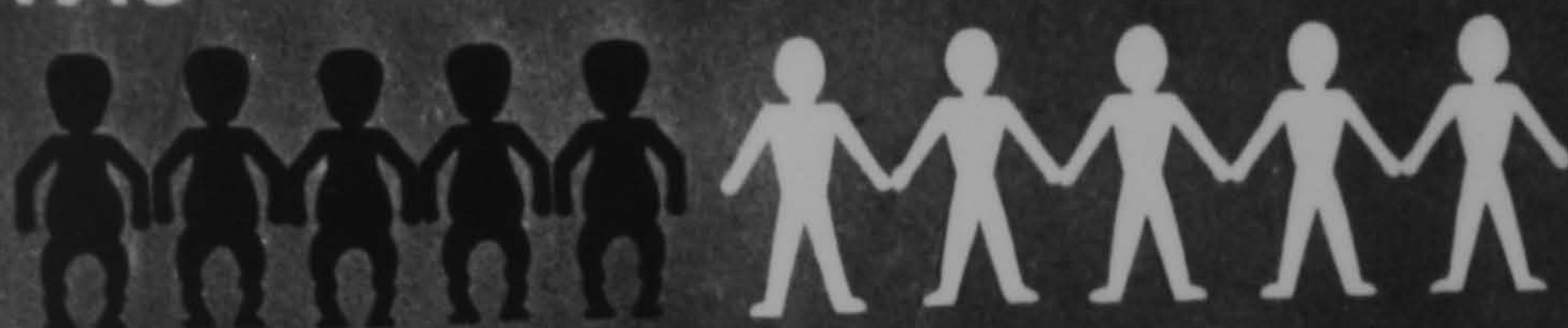
Appendix 1: Still from the *World of Plenty* (1943). A map of the world with Isotypes showing the food producing areas. Imperial War Museum Photograph Archive, accession no. FLM 1813.



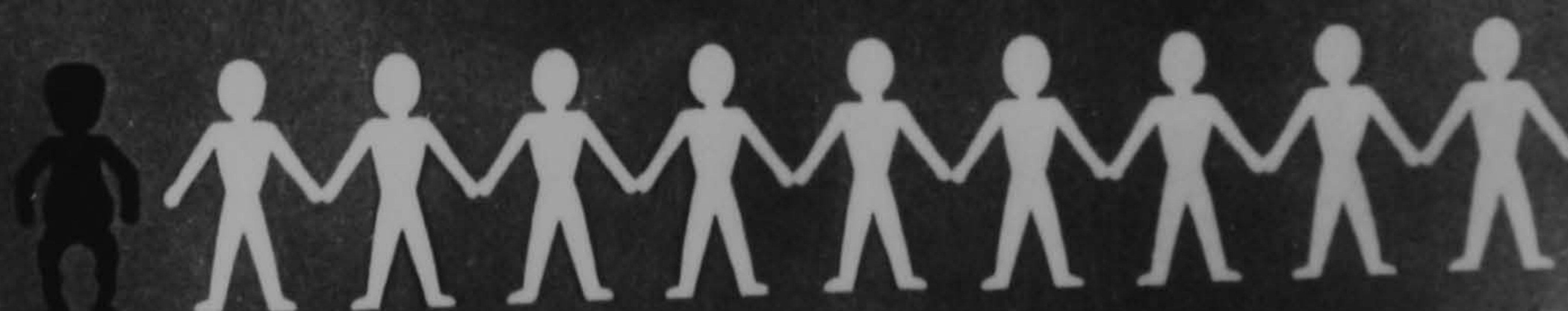
Appendix 2: Stills from the *World of Plenty* (1943). Isotype charts showing the statistics for deaths from rickets and tuberculosis in industrial areas. Imperial war museum Photograph Archive, accession no. FLM 1814.

Rickets in industrial areas

1913



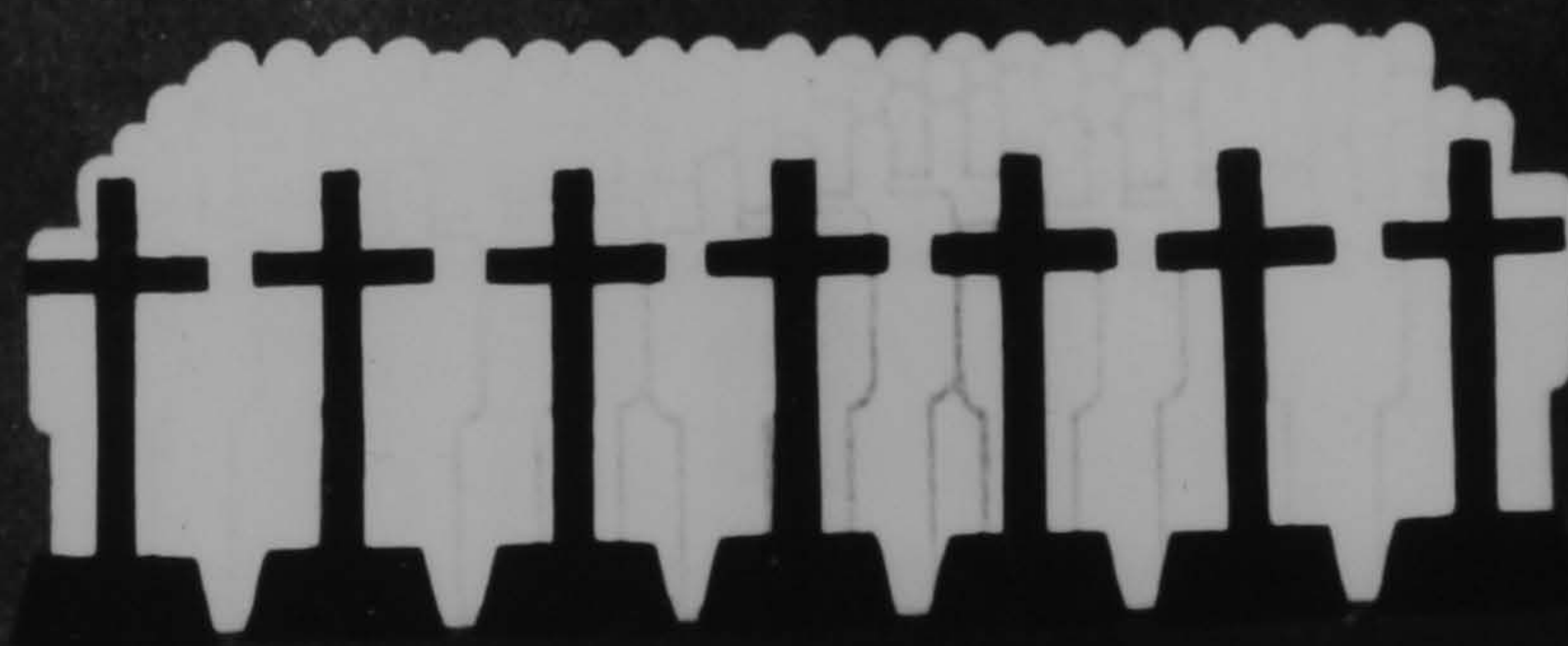
1939



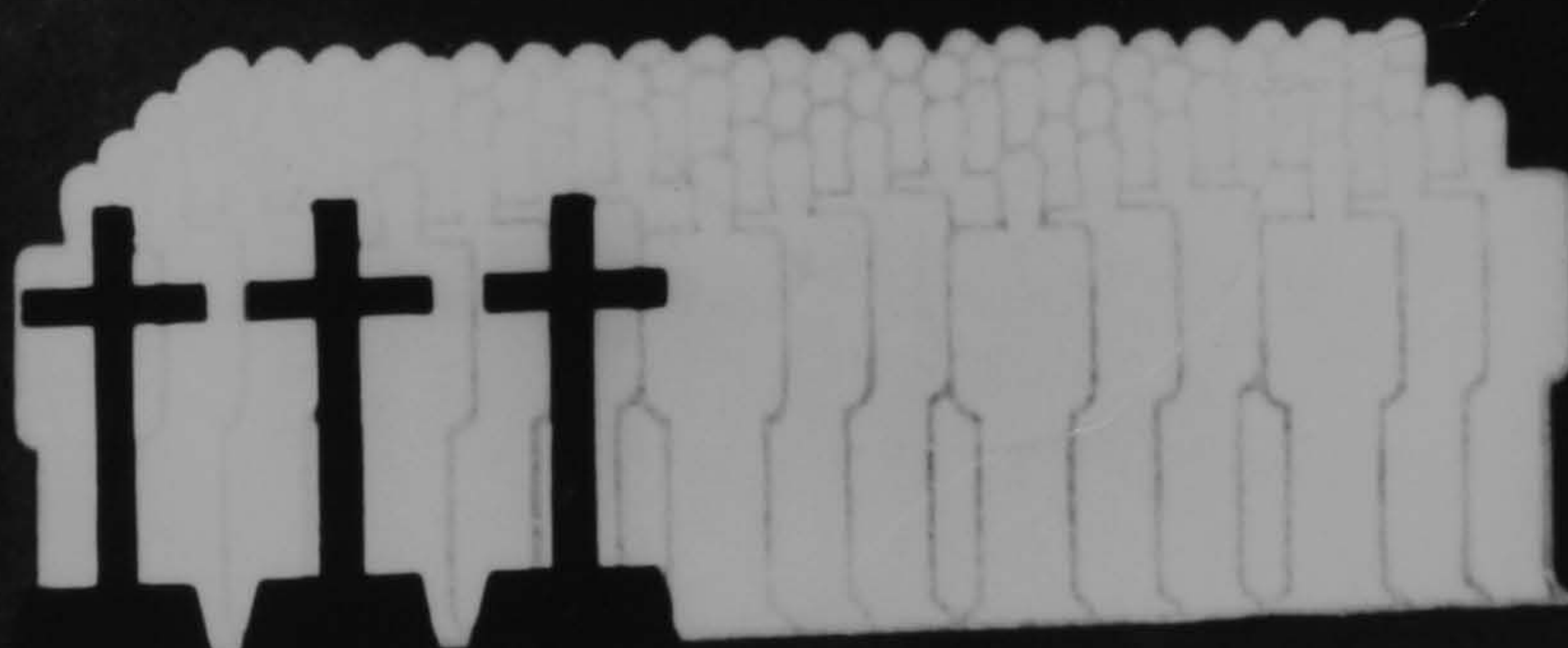
Each figure: one out of 10 children

Deaths from Tuberculosis per 5000 population

1913



1938



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